

SIGNS, CITY WALL, CITY PATH

City change, at least in a culture of urban planning, often starts in the realm of the invisible, in an office or a document, and from a location remote from the site in question. Time, money and research are invested while a site sits unchanged, dumb to the plans that are being made for its future. Planners strive to organize the sloppy, complicated questions that cities pose by creating rational structure for all that chaos to flow into. This works on paper: zoning provides a rule for just about any circumstance a city can come up with. Where it falls apart is at the site itself: a decision that might have looked good in a plan can seem immediately odd, the wrong size, or out of place. With a disregard for context or a low use value, remotely made decisions are immediately apparent to those who use a space and understand it experientially.

The subtle hints of impending development - some modest orange flags or a bland permit application sign - are often the first indication where passers-by might be made aware of what is to follow. Next comes the marketing material, selling the idea or the property. Showier and more explicit, this signage is targeted not at the people who currently use a site, but the ones for whom the site in its future capacity is intended. To those familiar with the place, these slick visions often read like a one-line joke, making an absurd promise or proposition for that space. The humor is in the incongruence, and local knowledge is critical to getting in on the joke.

A similar relationship exists between locals and tourist literature. Reading a visitor's guide for your own city yields a truncated view, and there's as much amusement in seeing what gets left out as what gets put in. Imaginary borders are drawn and portions of maps get covered. Visitors are directed to seek certain destinations while disregarding others. Unpleasant conditions get downplayed or omitted, and the presentation is freed from the complications of a real city.

With the genuine intention to increase both economic and use value of a city, planners mediate between the objectives of government and the interests of developers, businesses and residents. When phrases like 'green space' or 'cultural hub' get attached to large-scale projects before their meaning is thoroughly investigated, their inclusion functions as an after-thought rather than a part of the design process. Futile parks get created where no one wants to walk their dog or sit outside and paths get built that lead from nowhere to nowhere.

When city planners are involved in the process, finding a location for an 'art installation' is a confounding question. The planning logic seeks a space where the work will enhance a site's value without infringing on any adjacent interests. Where can a work be inserted that will remain innocuous; where can 'culture' be plugged in? The artist seeks a site appropriate or specific to the work itself, chosen based on site conditions or social context. While neither agenda is problematic in its own rite, the process of negotiation between them poses the same risk as creating the futile park or the path to nowhere.

The way a city sees and understands itself is built up from a complex palimpsest of experience, media and memory. The competing and unstable images of the city presented to us through visual culture, including signage, marketing and critical artwork, are fundamental to this collective knowledge, and will continue to inform the perception of locals and tourists alike.

Laura Kozak, 2010

Signs, City Wall, City Path occupies two sites located along the west side of the Carrall Street greenway: one in Suzhou Alley (next to 529 Carrall Street) and the other just north of Pender Street, across from the Princeton Pub. Local artists Jenipher Hur and Avery Nabata address the familiar features of Vancouver's constantly changing cityscape, subtly drawing our critical attention to the way the city represents and negotiates its complex social reality.

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