Architecture: A Tale Of Three Cities
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Architecture

A Tale Of Three Cities

By ADA LOUISE HUXTABLE

A TWO-WEEK trip through three cities of the American Northwest and Canada is a revealing experience for an effete Easterner. Seattle, Portland and Vancouver, B.C., are experiencing the same terrible pressures and critical changes that are destroying urban identities and values everywhere.

But the cities of the Northwest are young cities, without the impacted layers of decay and despair of the older, Eastern centers. And they enjoy settings of natural grandeur that few parts of the world can match.

The Cascade range gives four snowy mountain peaks to Portland, etched like a Japanese print against a clear-day sky. Nine miles of solid forest in the West Hills can almost be touched from the downtown streets. Seattle, in spite of the mutilation of a city-splitting expressway and an elevated road along the waterfront, still spills down steep avenues to a harbor as rewarding as John Steinbeck found it a generation ago.

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The bays and mountains of Vancouver have that splendid juxtaposition that makes one of the most magnificent of all urban sites. It is reminiscent of La Guaira with the mountains of Caracas rising sharply above, but with the added drama of snow and the soft, enduring northern green that makes this upper land so much more welcoming than the beauties of the California coast.

Like all of the cities of North America, these three are being totally transformed. The quarter of a century since the war has made most cities unrecognizable to prewar visitors, a phenomenon of radical urban change peculiar to our times that residents take for granted but that history will record as one of the most fantastic chapters of 20th-century civilization.

The near past has been destroyed or eclipsed by new skylines of massive scale giving new profiles and patterns to familiar names. Some cities might as well have new names.

Vancouver, always an immigration point for the north, has that continuing sense of flux characteristic of international port cities where people look for new lives. Here a shabby cosmopolitanism overtook a provincial British outpost, mixing the primitive north with older world cultures. The high hills over deep harbors are as close to environmental Elysium as it is possible to get if you don't mind a little rain.

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Today central Vancouver has erupted into a city of glistening towers. They seem to have been dropped down by some alien urban god into streets of two-story frame houses, next to smalltown honky-tonk. Huge holes in the ground are filled with the immense steel skeletons of rising blockbusters, often by imported architects: instant international city in the universal corporate mold. Unfinished buildings stand in a frozen state of incompletion due to endless strikes.

This is a city in the act of becoming—a radical metamorphosis on which an almost visible daily score can be kept. It is a 20th-century boomtown, in spite of increasingly bleak unemployment statistics. It is a boomtown of bankers. New bank towers in enclaves are threaded by streets of good, small shops where flowers and produce, European food specialties, far-out fashions and consummate kitsch coexist—squeezed, probably fatally, by land deals and new buildings.

"Block front" prices are $85 a square foot and still rising. The city, like all boomtowns, would be ugly without nature's munificence. It has vitality in its easy internationalism, without chic.

Vancouver's hippies, including a colony of quasi-Buddhists ringing rock-rhythm bells, gather on the Court House square with its fountain lit in garish reds and blues at night. The girls, gotten up as Eliza Doolittles, sell flowers to the out-of-towners who are always passing through. Traffic congeals, brought to a halt by a three-lane bridge leading to West Vancouver, where clustered apartment skyscrapers sprout like new asparagus in an incomparable mountain-backed setting.

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Town Planning Commission chairman John Lecky is quoted as warning that traffic will strangle downtown Vancouver in the early 1970's. A municipal report on rapid transit is due next month. Regional government is discussed increasingly as a solution to pyramiding problems. Meanwhile, growth goes on. The value of building permits issued in greater Vancouver, according to estimates at the time of application, which are below actual costs, have skyrocketed from $109,827,000 in 1960 to $339,211,000 in 1969. The figures have more than doubled for commercial construction, almost tripled for industrial construction, and more than quadrupled for residential building.

The automobile is the destroyer everywhere. In Portland, the cohesive and intimately scaled core city is being decimated for parking lots and parking garages. The trend can only lead to total physical disintegration. But here, as elsewhere, there is no sign that anyone is willing to take to anything except his car, whatever the urban consequences may be.

The dramatic clutch of new Portland skyscrapers is killing the life of the street with parking garages in "podium" bases beloved by Establishment architects who successfully isolate their corporate totems from the urban fabric and the city's essential humanity. A report just made public urges the banning of automobiles from many of Portland's nearby beaches, where they have become an environmental and safety hazard.

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In Seattle, the landscape of parking garages proliferates. Battles rage around highway plans, joined by the young radicals of the Seattle Liberation Front. The City Council voted 7 to 2 earlier this month to erase one expressway from the city's maps. Another contested route has been given a "design concept team" to reduce environmental damage. Victor Steinbrueck, Seattle architect and longtime protector of the city's perennially threatened Farmer's Market, recently called for the resignation of the architects on the team "in the public interest." But Seattle voters turned down mass transit in 1968 and again in May of this year.

The Farmer's Market still offers crisp native lettuce at two heads for 29 cents and fragrant strawberries at 29 cents a box. New vegetables jostle whole fresh salmon and Dungeness crab in an irreplaceable, aromatic, colorful, lively, epicurean and intensely human mix of products and pleasures. It is one of Seattle's greatest assets, if you like the arts of living, or most tempting bit of underdeveloped waterfront land, if you like real estate better.

The route to the Seattle waterfront is down past steeply ranged, older commercial buildings of considerable style and substance and rising new skyscrapers. One of the most urbane big buildings in the country, the Seattle First National Bank, has just been completed by nationally known local architects Naramore, Bain, Brady and Johanson. It lifts 50 stories of bronze-tinted glass and aluminum in a suave, sophisticated shaft that makes no equivocation with the big time. Seattle has it.

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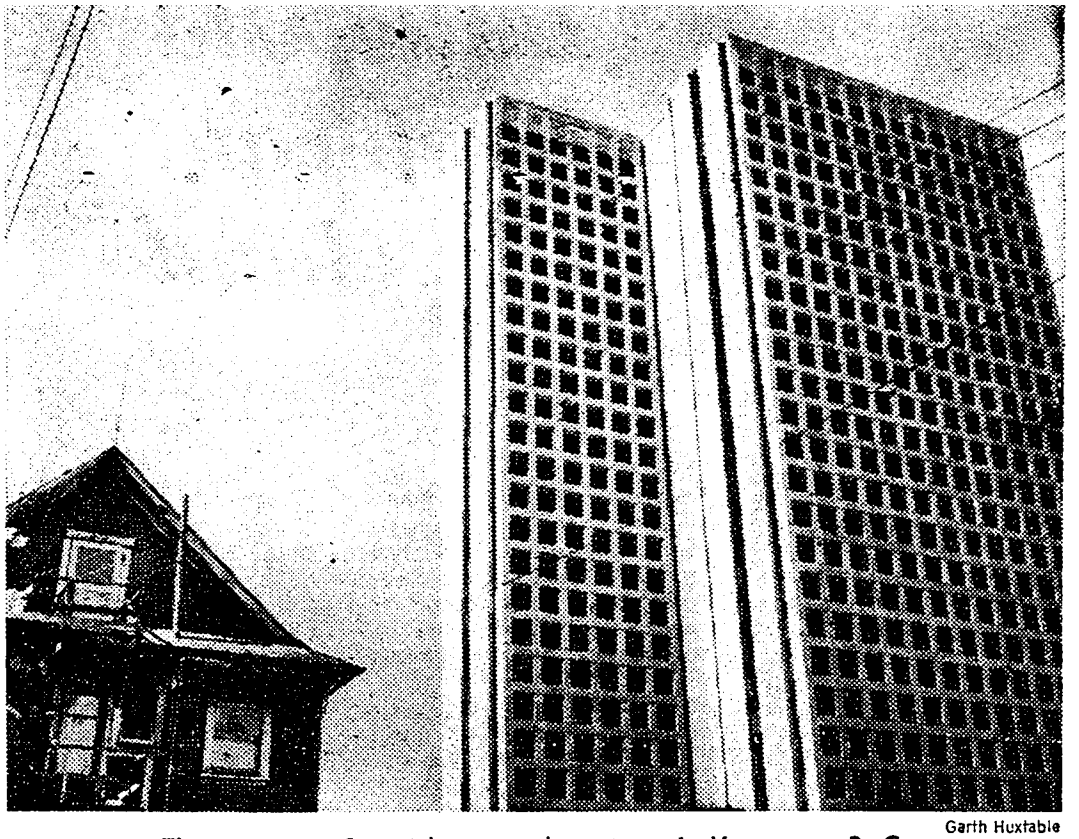
Seattle also has political polarization and serious unemployment. With cutbacks in Boeing contracts and the effects of environmentalism on the state's lumber industry, it is a city in trouble—with much of the Northwest. And to prove that things are pretty much the same everywhere, a Seattle firm was recently given $18,000 worth of marble from a renovated country courthouse, just to haul it away. It was only from the restrooms, county officials explained. Sic transit the culture of cities.



Garth Huxtable

The contrasts of a 20th-century boomtown in Vancouver, B. C.
Towers dropped into streets of frame houses by some alien urban god