

# Blueprints for a city, past and future

## Forums and exhibits fill new Urbanarium as planners and the public get in on the act

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**H**OADINGS and graffiti art surround a two-story building in downtown Vancouver, conveying to any passersby that something is temporary or awaiting completion. That's precisely the idea behind Urbanarium, a unique new festival inside the building which is a first step toward what its organizers hope will be a permanent facility.

There are aquariums to study fish, and planetariums to study planets. So, the reasoning goes, why not an urbanarium to study cities? To that end, a society has been formed by a variety of municipal, academic and private groups in the city to establish in the next few years (at a projected cost of \$4.5-million) an exhibition hall, laboratory and resource centre to study the different opportunities available in planning a city.

"A lot of cities have a passive data base," says Catherine Alkenbrack, the festival curator. "But we see this as being a more participatory thing, where architects, planners and residents can come in and really talk about what this city, or any city, should be."

To that extent, Urbanarium is working well. Some of the public forums on urban issues have attracted 300 people. Located in an old motor vehicle testing centre on Georgia Street, Urbanarium (which runs until Saturday) also has a number of exhibits. A huge model of the downtown area, 28 feet square, can be adjusted to show how new buildings (or old proposals) would look. Unbuilt Vancouver is an exhibit of models for plans that almost succeeded but failed for various reasons. And Lost Vancouver is an interpretation of the city and its possibilities by 16 local artists who have been commissioned for the occasion.

Vancouver is an ideal city for examining options in planning and design because there have been so many dramatic interventions of various governments in capitalizing on its unique site. Twenty years ago, the market at Granville Island, the popular housing on the south side of False Creek, and the Expo lands (whose fate will be decided within months) were just run-down industrial lands. Despite its clear real estate value, Stanley Park has remained untouched and public access to the waterfront downtown is the envy of other waterfront cities. In 1925, a planner noted that nearly 4 miles of the 5.5 mile shoreline from Stanley Park to the Burrard bridge was in private hands. Now, it is all in the public domain.

The number of good choices Vancouver has made over the years gives the might-have-been projects of Unbuilt Vancouver particular relevance. Almost all of them look disastrous. Several times, particular-

ly in the sixties, a plan that would have sliced Gastown and Stanley Park with a freeway was considered. An early landscape architect named Edward Mawson proposed a lavish, Beaux Arts civic centre in Stanley Park, dubbing Georgia Street "the Champs Elysées of Vancouver." One of his colleagues proposed a deep-sea port off Kitsilano, where public pools and parks now grace the shoreline.

Arthur Erickson once proposed a soaring, spiralling housing project in the west end, 100 stories high at its peak, about which even he says "it was just as well it was never built." And scale was also the chief problem with Richard's Henriquez' intriguing Burrard Tower, a huge skyscraper with a large hole in the middle — a hole shaped, cookie-mold style, to match the profile of the historic Marine Hydro Building at the other end of Burrard Street.

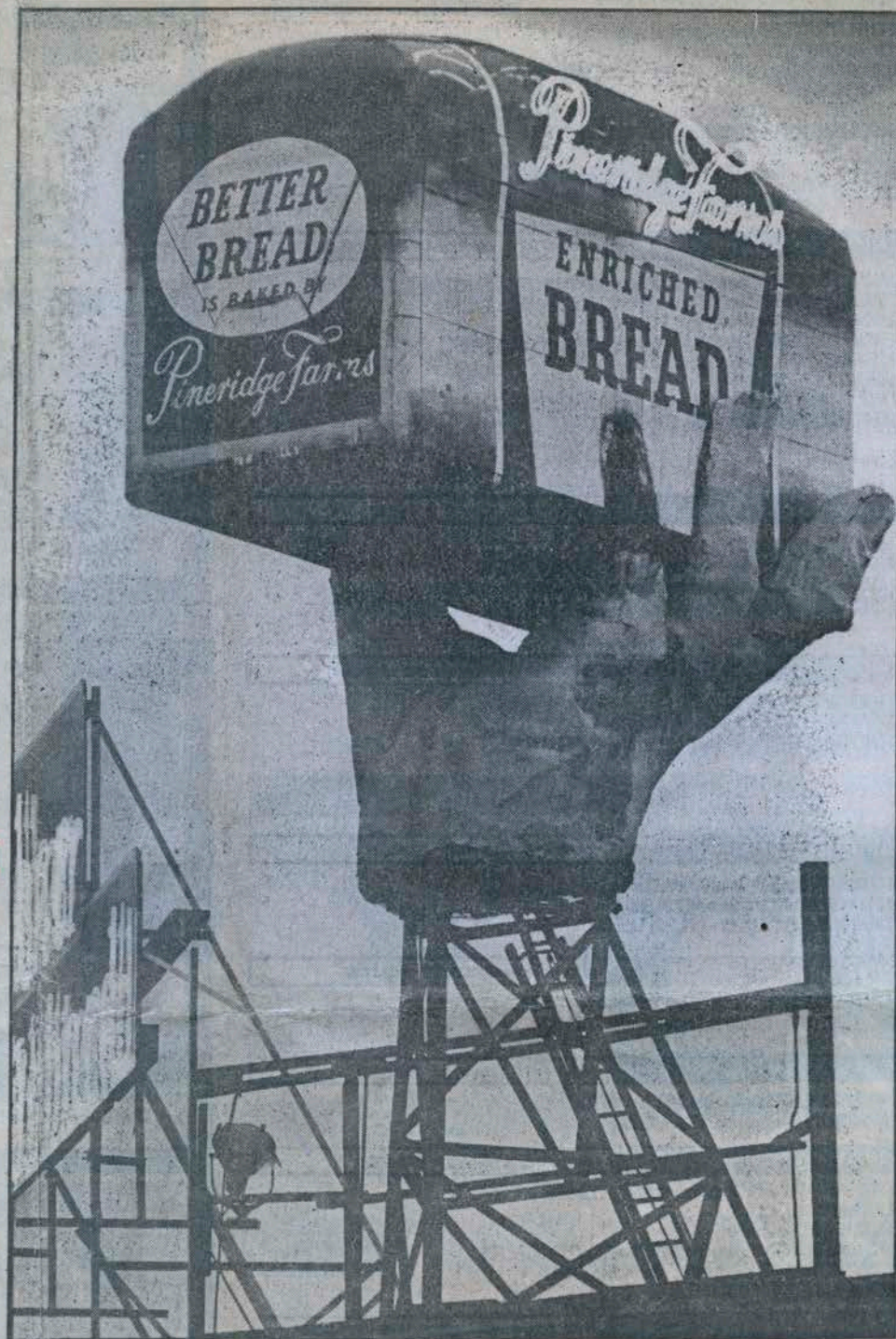
Lost Vancouver is intended to show 16 visual artists creating an appreciation for both the visceral, and ephemeral, elements that make up the city. But the only works which seem to reflect the architectonics and the human elements of the accompanying exhibit, is Georgiana Chappell's strikingly theatrical entrance, with girding and lights evoking a construction site at night; Henri Robideau's warm and witty anthem to lost landmarks; and Mary Filer's glass sculptures, which deal with the uses of light and proportion in the same way as many of the models on display.

Over-all, the Urbanarium exhibits themselves seem like a rough draft, as ephemeral as the graffiti outside. There are also clear signs that money was short; instead of display panels, most of the projects are accompanied by appropriate pages ripped out of the tabloid program and taped to the wall.

Money will still be a problem in keeping the idea alive and Alkenbrack says it is too early to tell just where the support is going to come from after this year. Still, as a kind of museum for the potential of cities, Urbanarium is a fascinating overture to what could be a great facility.

Over at the Vancouver Art Gallery, a group of architects and designers have created Urban ReVisions, as a satellite show to Urbanarium. The exhibit is an attempt to provide visions for the future by dividing the city into 12 areas and allowing a team to propose an imaginative choice for the year 2087.

Unfortunately, the exhibit is marred by apparent haste and poor design. Explanatory notes are frequently unclear and oddly placed. The dozen wire-mesh boxes which contain each proposal and are intended to evoke city blocks instead convey The City as Prison, in part because only



Detail from Henri Robideau's witty anthem to the city's lost landmarks.

half the teams have bothered to utilize the inside space. Some of the projects are airily symbolic, particularly one of North Vancouver redesigned in the shape of a thunderbird, while others are simply confusing.

Still, some of the plans spark the imagination, particularly a vision of Gastown redefined by a wedge of water and public promenade, and a futuristic vision of Burrard Inlet dotted with a virtual city of sampans. The two overriding issues that emerge from the exhibition are the headaches of railway tracks — is any city

happy with railway tracks? — and the possibilities inherent in Vancouver's shoreline, which has ebbed and flowed over the years through various drainage and infill schemes.

The topographical opportunities of the city are one of the things that make Urban ReVisions (and Urbanarium in general) possible in the first place. The festival provides a convincing demonstration that architects and planners here probably have an edge in finding exciting ways to massage the present city into the twenty-first century.