

Design Intent for the New Vancouver Art Gallery

Jacques Herzog says:

“The urbanistic concept is based on the contrast between the low-rise framing along the street block and the taller and more sculptural building in the middle of an open and accessible garden and plaza. The low-rise wooden building along the street is inspired by how the streets in Vancouver were built in earlier times. Their modest, almost domestic scale will enhance the character of openness and visibility for everyone.”

Christine Binswanger, Partner in Charge, says:

“The project for the new Vancouver Art Gallery has a civic dimension that can contribute to the life and identity of the city, in which many artists of international reputation live and work. It will be a powerful statement to construct this large building out of wood, a material with a long tradition in British Columbia.”

Pierre de Meuron says:

“The museum will offer a wide range of very different gallery spaces – different in size and proportion, different in light conditions and views they offer, but also in their materiality and their positioning within the topographic complex of the museum.”

Herzog & de Meuron say:

“The new Vancouver Art Gallery is a vertical building, seemingly spectacular at first sight, with an arrangement that resonates with the place it is built. It offers ample outdoor spaces that are sunny in summer and protected from rain in winter, to suit the climate and life in British Columbia. Visitors to the building will be able to perceive Vancouver’s urbanity and its amazing natural setting in many different ways.”

A Gallery on the Move

The Vancouver Art Gallery stands at another threshold in its history of constant change. In fact, the Gallery has grown and moved three times since it first opened in 1931, with the most recent move in 1983 to the historic courthouse building on Robson Square.

After more than a decade of research and planning, the Gallery is making great progress with its plan to construct a new, purpose-built art museum of roughly double the size of the current Courthouse facility. The Gallery’s collection and ambitious programming has long since outgrown the current facility. In April 2013 Vancouver City Council voted unanimously to earmark a portion of the Larwill Park site at West Georgia and Cambie Streets for a new Gallery.

The new Vancouver Art Gallery will not just be an art museum, but an institution that creates and strengthens links with diverse communities throughout the city, province, country and around the world. The Gallery will make visible Vancouver’s connections to other places in the world, and enhance the city’s reputation as an international centre for contemporary art.

From July 2014 to September 2015, Herzog & de Meuron developed a masterplan and the proposed conceptual design for the new building in close collaboration with the Vancouver Art Gallery and Perkins+Will Vancouver as the Executive Architects.

Reading Vancouver

Nature and City

Vancouver is a vibrant city in a unique natural setting. Located on the Pacific Ocean at the foot of the North Shore Mountains, the city is framed by sweeping views and an abundance of recreational opportunities – beaches in the summer and ski slopes in the winter.

Vancouver has a moderate climate year round and above-average rainfall, making for a remarkably green city. In the midst of it lies the Downtown Peninsula with its concentration of tall towers. This area has substantially less green at its core but features a large urban park – Stanley Park – an evergreen forest framed by a seawall that surrounds the Peninsula offering uninterrupted public access to the water.

Both the Downtown Peninsula and the surrounding city consist of lively neighbourhoods with a mix of uses. The downtown core has a large residential community with neighborhoods that are active 24 hours a day, unlike the downtown areas of many other North American cities that shut down at night. The city surrounding the Peninsula is dense with commercial streets making the lower scale neighbourhoods active as well.

Downtown Peninsula

Vancouver's Downtown Peninsula has grown at an unprecedented rate over the last few decades. Until the 1970s the city's fabric was primarily a low-rise grid. By the 1930s, the urbanization had already spread to the city limits, dominated by low commercial structures, wooden row houses and empty lots used for parking. On the Peninsula, this low-rise fabric has been erased by mushrooming development over the past decades, practically wiping out all traces of the city's recent past.

However, this transformation positioned Vancouver on the world map as a model of densification and mixed-use development, as the city prioritized compact downtown residential living instead of urban sprawl, and public transportation instead of highways. The buildings themselves, with their repetitive glass facades, have given large portions of the city a somewhat homogeneous look. Such homogeneity is often characteristic of cities that experience massive development in a short period, as seen, for instance, in the historical growth of Paris, London and parts of New York City or more recently in Asian megacities. In Vancouver, the surge of residential development led to a downtown dominated by similarly proportioned buildings clad in analogous glass facades where the view from inside took precedence over the architectural expression of the city. Within this context of generic construction, we want the museum to look different.

Streets and Buildings

The Downtown Peninsula features a variety of street and building typologies. The Downtown core, Davie Village, Granville Theatre District, parts of Yaletown, Gastown and Chinatown are characterized by adjoining buildings with their continuous street fronts of shops, restaurants and building entrances. In these parts of town that date back to the period between the 19th and mid-20th centuries, the sidewalks are still active and densely populated.

In contrast, more recent development marks other parts of the Peninsula such as False Creek, Coal Harbour and Downtown South, where the site for the new Vancouver Art Gallery is located. Here freestanding towers with large setbacks and in-between spaces often create undefined and under-utilized open areas with no pedestrian activity, serving rather as transient thoroughways to more active parts of town.

Grid and Topography

Like most North American cities Vancouver is a grid city. The grid covers the pronounced landscape like a rolling carpet; roads continue straight up or down regardless of topography, offering spectacular views of the landscape beyond.

Downtown Vancouver is essentially a hill with all of the streets descending to sea level from its summit at the centre of the Peninsula. West Georgia Street, for example, drops nearly 100 feet between Robson Square and False Creek. To deal with the sloping topography, the streets are lined with plinths, stairs, terraced planters, water features and retaining walls that create horizontal areas in front of the building's entries. Such urban design features can also be found near the site of the new Vancouver Art Gallery, which drops a full story in elevation along West Georgia and Dunsmuir Streets.

Larwill Park

Always a public space

Larwill Park, the site of the new Vancouver Art Gallery, is one of the last unbuilt city blocks on the Downtown Peninsula and is situated seven blocks east of the current Gallery's home on West Georgia. It is surrounded by public institutions: Queen Elizabeth Theatre, Vancouver Public Library, Central Post Office, Canadian Broadcasting Corporation, Vancouver Community College and the Beatty Street Drill Hall known as the Armoury. And it is located across from the busy Chinatown Stadium Train Station. One block down are two large sports venues, BC Place and Rogers Arena.

Larwill Park could easily be mistaken as one of the many once-empty sites in Vancouver awaiting development. However, up until the 1960s, when Larwill Park became the city bus depot, the site was one of Vancouver's most popular gathering places and had always been home to a variety of public activities. After its time as the Armoury's practice ground, Larwill Park became multi-functional, hosting sports games, travelling shows such as circuses, motorcycle races, political demonstrations and the like. Larwill Park was often lauded as an example of a flexible public space that did not require a large infrastructural framework.

Recently, in 2010, the site was again used for public gatherings during the Winter Olympics. It was home to Vancouver's "Live-City," where spectators gathered to watch live broadcasts of the competitions in the surrounding mountains.

Understanding the rich history and public potential of the site is crucial to developing the masterplan for the new Vancouver Art Gallery. Any proposal should consider the life and history of this site and should find a way to reinstate Larwill Park as a meaningful civic space of benefit to all Vancouverites.

Forever low

Two low historic buildings, the Armoury and the Queen Elizabeth Theatre, flank the site. Built in 1901 and 1959 respectively, both structures are remnants of the days when Vancouver was predominantly a low-rise city. Since they are protected heritage buildings, they will stay forever low providing air and light to the streets around them.

The Theatre is a modest, well-proportioned building, but unfortunately it is poorly connected to West Georgia Street as it negotiates the falling topography by resting on an elevated platform with stairs and retaining walls that limit public access from the street.

The Armoury is still in use today. Larwill Park was used as its drill and parade ground. Today, the Armoury is somewhat forgotten, cut off from Larwill Park by a tall retaining wall and dwarfed by the glass condominiums next to it. The new Vancouver Art Gallery has significant potential to bring about a new awareness and to relate to its historic neighbours.

Connecting neighbourhoods

Today Larwill Park again lies empty, functioning as a parking lot. However, despite its current use, many people regularly take shortcuts across the site. Larwill Park is important in the way it addresses West Georgia and Dunsmuir Streets but equally as a connector between the west and the east of the peninsula. The site has much potential to form a strong link from Yaletown and Central

Downtown to Gastown and Chinatown, also because new businesses, cafes and popular restaurants have begun to pop up in the area. With the planned remodelling of the viaducts, the new Vancouver Art Gallery could even be seen as a link from Downtown to East Vancouver where the commercial gallery scene is burgeoning, many artists have their studios, and the future home of Emily Carr University of Art + Design will be situated.

The New Vancouver Art Gallery The Urban Plan

Establish street fronts in the spirit of the grid, create public space and permeability inside

The City of Vancouver has offered the Vancouver Art Gallery Association a 99-year lease for two-thirds of the Larwill Park site to build the new 310,000 square foot Gallery. The remaining one-third of the site will be designated for commercial development.

The height limits are dictated by two corridors that ensure a view of the mountains from certain vantage points in the city. The resulting height limit lies between 225 and 250 feet, the standard height of most of the towers in Downtown Vancouver.

The new Vancouver Art Gallery stands on West Georgia Street, framing Queen Elizabeth Square. It is a sculptural, symmetrical and upright building. From an urban standpoint it is a classical type: a recognizable public building along a prominent boulevard. On street level, a one-storey building lines the streets and frames an open-air courtyard around the Gallery.

Two identical commercial towers, simple rectangular extrusions without plinths, are placed at the exact corners of the block on Dunsmuir Street. They are similar in height to the Gallery, and a central alley between them connects to its public courtyard maintaining the permeability of the former Larwill Park.

The masterplan establishes clear street fronts and inserts the block in the grid overlaying the whole city. At the same time it creates quality public space within the block.

In the framework of this masterplan, we also suggest remodelling Queen Elizabeth Square, although this is out of the scope of our commission. With the move of the Vancouver Art Gallery to Larwill Park, Queen Elizabeth Square would become the heart of the so-called Cultural Corridor along West Georgia Street. In its present configuration as an elevated hardscaped plaza, it cannot fulfil its role as the focal point of access for the two major cultural institutions, nor can it become a successful public space. We therefore suggest razing the plinth to follow the street's topography and to landscape the slope.

The Architecture

Very low, very high

The new Vancouver Art Gallery has a very low and a very high component. The exceptionally low component addresses human scale and street life, whilst the high one offers public visibility within the vertically dominated Downtown Peninsula.

The low building densifies and activates the public realm around the new Vancouver Art Gallery by providing an active and accessible, continuous street front. The building contains entrances to the courtyard from all four surrounding streets. It also responds to the topography along West Georgia: The building's roofline follows the slope of the street, resulting in the building which is consistently low throughout. In scale and materiality, it echoes the low wooden structures of early Vancouver, including those that framed Larwill Park until their demolition in the 1950s.

The courtyard is open to everybody, an urban space where museum-goers and others crisscross and encounter one another daily. On the other hand, it can also be a place for a variety of artistic practices and experiences, from art installations to performances to concerts and evening cinema

programs. The cantilevered roofs of the one-storey structure and the main building rising above the courtyard offer ample covered outdoor space, both needed and welcomed during the relatively mild but wet Vancouver winters. At the same time the courtyard gets enough sun in spring and summer, an equally important factor to ensure an enjoyable outdoor space in British Columbia. The Gallery courtyard preserves the powerful legacy of Larwill Park as an active civic space.

Exhibition galleries (one of which is free to the public), the Resource Centre for research, library services and artist archives, a café and store are situated around the courtyard. They can all be accessed not only from the courtyard but from the street as well. The Gallery lobby below the courtyard is accessed by a sweeping ceremonial staircase between Cambie Street, the courtyard and the lobby. A suite of galleries and education studios unfold around the lobby. A densely planted sunken garden brings nature and light into the lobby and the galleries, while some other double-height galleries rise up to street level, allowing for another form of daylight and even views into them from the street.

The tall building is an upright symmetrical figure, sculpted to express its inner life and to respond to the local climate. The building rests on four cores, rising 40 feet above the courtyard. The arrangement of the vertical stack allows the sun to reach the courtyard level by minimizing the mass at the bottom and maximizing it at the top. Generous setbacks and overhangs alternate creating covered as well as open terrace spaces on different levels.

The lower levels are mostly transparent. The Auditorium with its lobby and the Gallery's offices on the 2nd and 3rd floors, the restaurant with its large covered terrace on the 4th floor and the main concourses leading up to the exhibition spaces all animate the lower portion of the building, making the Gallery's activities visible in the surrounding city.

The upper levels primarily house the galleries and are therefore more opaque and solid. Precisely placed openings allow people to look into the galleries from outside and to look out at the city from inside.

A variety of art spaces are distributed throughout the museum. Large suites are located both around the below grade lobby and at levels 5 and 6. Some smaller exhibition spaces are dispersed around the courtyard and at the top roof terrace on level 7. The upper levels also feature education studios with easy access to the galleries. The galleries differ in height, proportion and size. All gallery levels provide natural light and views to either the courtyard, the neighbourhood or the city and the spectacular landscape beyond. The variety of gallery spaces responds to the need for specificity and difference to display a collection as multifaceted as that of the Vancouver Art Gallery. Secondly, the variety addresses the wide range of anticipated temporary exhibitions, and takes into account the many forms of artistic practice in our times and beyond.

A wooden building in a city that has become defined by a glass skyline? Wood is the material of the city that Vancouver once was. But it is not sentimentality that propels this proposal. It is a specific and conscious choice for this particular project. Precedents and expertise in the use of wood abound in Vancouver and British Columbia. The design team is looking forward to benefiting from that knowledge in the design phases ahead.

Unique for a building of this type and size, wood instantly generates a sense of familiarity and human scale. The striking sculptural stack of the large institutional building is softened; the wood enables it to age and change over time, in contrast to the conventionally "clean" museum. And that takes us back to the beginning: within the context of so much generic construction, the Vancouver Art Gallery *must* stand apart: as a building and as an institution.