



# Urban magnets:

*Innovative lessons from Granville Island on authenticity and economic development*

By Mark Holland



## SUMMARY

*This article explores a concept called Urban Magnets that helps explain why Granville Island has been so successful in the face of its many challenges. The Urban Magnet concept offers an equation of elements for planning a place around activity-based subcultures. This article posits three core points: that "the people are the place" far more than the physical form; that urban vitality is built out of "subcultures" not generic culture; and that there are six elements required to truly make a place magnetic and vital to a subculture. In so doing, this article challenges preconceptions we have about creating successful urban places, including past theories about why Granville Island has been successful.*

## RÉSUMÉ

*Cet article propose une réflexion sur le concept appelé « pôles d'attraction urbains » qui permet de mieux comprendre la réussite de Granville Island en dépit des nombreux obstacles à surmonter. Le concept pose une équation d'éléments à résoudre pour aménager un espace qui s'articule autour d'activités basées sur les sous-cultures. L'article adopte comme postulats trois notions principales, soit que : « les gens créent l'endroit » bien plus que ne le font les éléments physiques; la vitalité urbaine est alimentée par les « sous-cultures » et non par une culture générique; il y a six éléments nécessaires pour faire d'un lieu un pôle d'attraction qui soit crucial pour une sous-culture. Ce faisant, l'article remet en question des idées préconçues sur l'aménagement d'espaces urbains dynamiques, y compris d'anciennes théories sur les raisons de la réussite de Granville Island*

## WHY DOESN'T GRANVILLE ISLAND FAIL?

If we were to create a development concept for a commercial development that was guaranteed to fail, what would its characteristics be? Poor to no visibility? Difficult access and parking? Odd sizes and shapes of commercial spaces that cannot be easily adapted? Aged and dilapidated buildings with heritage controls that make changes difficult? Sounds like a recipe for a disaster, right?

Despite having all these challenging characteristics, Granville Island has become one of the most successful and popular urban destinations in North America, attracting over 10 million visitors a year.<sup>1</sup>

**GRANVILLE ISLAND:  
PAST AND FUTURE**

In the early 1970s, Granville Island started on a unique path of transformation, from a derelict waterfront industrial site into the success it is today. Under the leadership of many visionary public figures and its designers (Hotson Bakker Architects), the Island was conceived as a place of “urban opportunity and interest,” envisioned as having a different character than generic places associated with that era’s modern development. Key principles for the Island’s development included respect for historical character, authenticity, innovation, experimentation, unfinished settings, self-expression, and a low level of institutional controls. The idea was to create an ‘intimate connection’ between industrial and domestic uses.

While strategic leadership and investment from government secured the existing leases and led the visioning and redevelopment of the Island in the early 1970s, it has remained largely the same for the past 40 years, growing into an iconic Canadian destination.

Recently, Emily Carr University of Art and Design announced its intention to move out of Granville Island and relocate to another site in Vancouver. This change both removes a powerful element of the Island’s identity and economy and presents the managers, Canada Mortgage and Housing Corporation (CMHC), with the challenge of filling over 200,000 sq. ft. of space in a way that would enhance the Island’s unique experience. This challenge along with changes in the demographics of users, the economy, stagnant growth in the Island’s food market, traffic concerns, and a growing pressure from the Island’s

tenants to refresh the vision and to address governance issues, led to the Granville Island 2040 process and plan.

Created by a stellar cast of professionals, tenants and the community, and submitted to CMHC in 2017, the Granville Island 2040 plan now enters a many year implementation process, with success yet to be determined. However, Granville Island’s past success offers many interesting lessons for Canadian downtowns and their special places, as well as for its own future development.

**MISTAKES MADE IN  
UNDERSTANDING GRANVILLE  
ISLAND’S SUCCESS**

Several mistakes are often made when analyzing Granville Island’s success. The first is attributing its success to CMHC, which manages the Island on behalf of the Government of Canada. What would happen if any city council in Canada handed control and management of their downtown to CMHC? Would it become as successful as Granville Island? Likely not. Although CMHC has played a fundamental role, the real reason for the Island’s success comes from ongoing implementation of the original vision.

The second mistake is to attribute the Island’s success to its older and repurposed industrial architecture or the presence of the concrete plant. It is not uncommon to find failed or struggling Granville Island look-alikes or other industrial-styled precincts in Canadian cities, with clusters of old industrial buildings fully or in-part repurposed into other uses. Clearly an industrial aesthetic of architecture or the presence of a concrete plant is not a ticket to success.

The final common mistake is to attribute Granville Island’s success to the residential density that surrounds it. While an urban population does support a base demand for its iconic market and restaurants, the same or denser population exists in many areas of many cities. Data from Granville Island’s market indicates that it performs nearly as high or higher than some of the most successful retail areas in the Vancouver?

Why then does Granville Island remain so successful while defying conventional planning and retail norms? What lessons can be applied to downtowns where we live, to make them more successful?

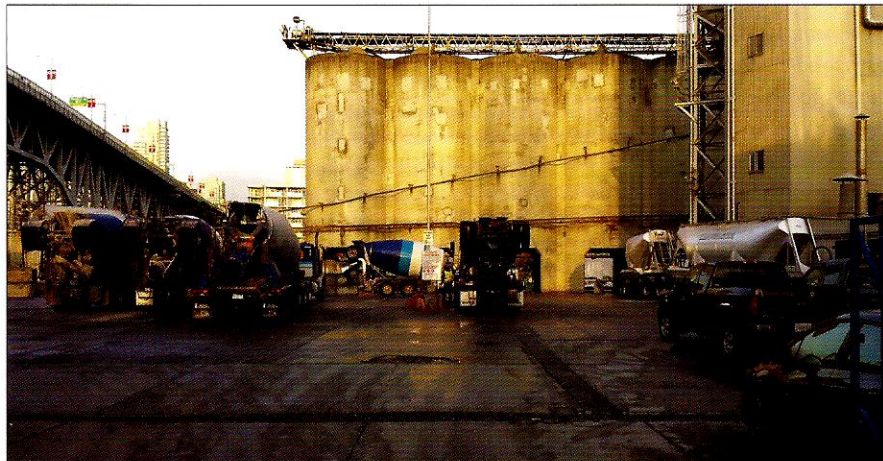
**AN INTRODUCTION TO THE  
CONCEPT OF URBAN MAGNETS**

We propose that Granville Island’s secret is not in its management, its location, its industrial buildings, or the presence of a concrete plant, but rather in its unique land use, design, and programming combinations, linked to three activity-based subculture groups. Granville Island is comprised of three ‘Urban Magnets’ and that is the secret to its success. The good news is that any community can create Urban Magnets.

An Urban Magnet is a place that is planned, designed and programmed around members of an ‘activity-based subculture’ with the aim of attracting them, supporting their desired activities, providing them with the goods and services they need, and physically reflecting their subculture identity in its physical form.

An Urban Magnet becomes a destination for core subcultures that infuse it with a unique character and vitality. The Magnet then becomes attractive to many others who come to watch and partake in the core subculture’s activities and lifestyle. This process then creates a much higher than average level of vitality for the place, building its reputation and attracting investment and growth. We can liken this to a “bonfire” – we build a large bonfire (lots of people and investment) by first starting with a small fire (the core subculture).

The primary lesson for planners is that a generically mixed use and aesthetically ‘nice’ plan and design runs the risk of not being interesting, memorable, unique, or magnetic enough to be truly successful.” The bottom line is that, when planning for vitality, “the people are the place,” more than the physical form.



Granville Island’s concrete plant.

## WHAT ARE THE ELEMENTS OF AN URBAN MAGNET?

An Urban Magnet has six essential elements:

1. An activity-based subculture that is its primary user group and the source of its identity and authenticity;
2. Specialty retail targeted at that subculture's unique needs;
3. Production and/or repair of goods or equipment used by this subculture;
4. Education and related institutions connected to the subculture;
5. Events to stimulate the subculture to gather and undertake or celebrate their 'core activity' together in a visible way; and
6. Urban form that supports the subculture's activities and reflects their identity and values, so they feel at home in the place.

### 1. ACTIVITY-BASED SUBCULTURES

Society is populated by many subcultures: small groups of people who share a unique set of values, behaviours, and identities that are slightly different from the so-called dominant culture.<sup>3</sup> Sociologists have often focused on aesthetic and political characteristics.

In the case of Urban Magnets, we are talking about a perspective on sub-cultures that is less political and more focused on groups who have a strong shared identity and love of certain activities. These can include foodies, boaters, skateboarders, rock climbers, musicians, artists, model-train enthusiasts, martial artists, and many more. These subcultures are built around what their members like to do individually and together, and their resulting sense

of shared identity. These activity subcultures cut across conventional diversity groups (age, gender, sexuality, ethnicity, etc...) and become not only an animating force in a community, but also one that is highly inclusive.

In Granville Island, three major subcultures form the pillars of the Island's vitality: boaters, foodies, and artists/performers. The Island offers an Urban Magnet to each subculture, allowing Granville to maintain a consistent economy and a strong sense of authenticity and attractiveness. Granville Island attracts many people who are part of these subcultures to come and do what they are passionate about – and then the rest of us come, watch, shop, and maybe participate in some way (to the tune of 10 million people per year).



### 2. SUBCULTURE-ORIENTED RETAIL

Activity subcultures need unique products to support their activities, many of which are only sold in specialty subculture-targeted retail outlets. Drawing the subculture to buy, engage, and learn from vendors, specialty retail not only supports the core group's needs, but also offers an economic opportunity for the rest of us to literally 'buy-into' a subculture.

Granville Island offers one of the best art stores in Canada (Opus), one of the most vibrant artisan food markets, and a host of marine and boating-related stores and brokers. These each make the Island a top shopping destination for its subcultures – and the rest of us – thereby generating a significant economy.



**3. PRODUCTION OR REPAIR OF GOODS AND EQUIPMENT**

One of the secrets to creating a sense of authenticity is to include on-site production or manufacturing. Production provides a unique spectacle, one that is authentic by not being self-conscious or focused on attracting the attention of others. A glass blower is focused on her work, impervious to onlookers peering through her studio window. This 'introversion' and the gritty nature of the work create a priceless sense of authenticity. These production, manufacturing or repair companies are also an important element of the local economy, providing an array of jobs that are largely independent of retail market changes.

Granville Island includes this production or repair element for all three of its magnets. Boats are made and repaired across the Island. Food and beverages are produced there. Art, costumes, ceramics, blown glass, theatre sets, and many other artistic elements are also made throughout the Island. It is critically important that many of these otherwise introverted production activities are visible and physically accessible from the sidewalk. They form a memorable experience not found in other parts of the urban fabric.

**4. EDUCATION AND OTHER SUBCULTURE INSTITUTIONS**

Educational uses, as well as other subculture-related institutions and companies constitute the fourth essential element by creating an important local economic engine (students, teachers, others) while adding another dimension to the authenticity of a place. Institutional or corporate uses further deepen the social and economic strength of the subculture.

Granville Island has numerous educational programs and companies associated with boating, diving, and other marine activities. One of Vancouver's largest culinary schools is located at the entrance to the Island. The Emily Carr University of Art and Design was present for decades, and the Island is also home to Arts Umbrella, the premiere children's education facility for arts and culture in Vancouver.

**5. EVENTS FOR THE SUBCULTURE**

The fifth element of an Urban Magnet comprises events over the course of a year that draw members of the subcultures together and provide unique opportunities for the rest of us to watch, learn, and maybe join in. Events also contribute to the economy that helps keep an area vital.

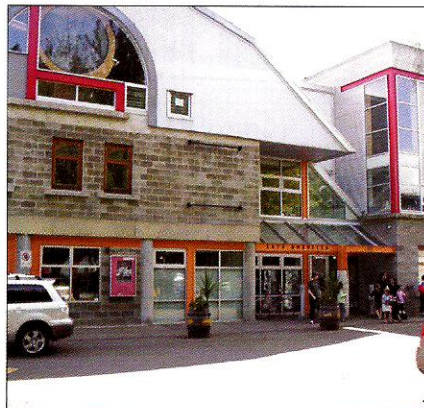
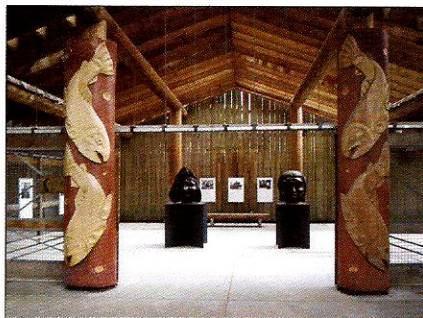
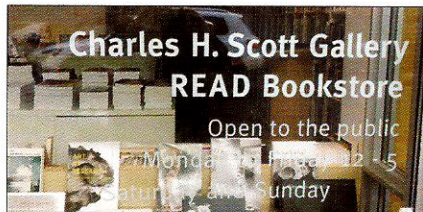
Granville Island has boating events, food and beverage-related events, and a steady stream of art and performance events throughout the year. Some are free and others are financial successes unto

themselves. Thousands of boaters, foodies, artists, and performers gather yearly, and millions of the rest of us come to watch, learn, and be entertained.

**6. SUBCULTURE-FRIENDLY URBAN FORM**

The final element in an Urban Magnet is its urban form. A Magnet needs to physically support the activities of the subculture both daily and for special events, while reflecting the values and aesthetics of the subculture in its built form.

We attribute values and identity to a place based on its aesthetics, its 'character.' An Urban Magnet will endeavour to shape its urban form to embody the values and identity of its core subculture. In Granville Island, the marina, marine-oriented detailing, and industrial architecture clearly resonate with its marine subculture. Meanwhile, the visibility of food throughout the area – stacks of food boxes, bakeries, eating areas, etc. – resonates with foodies. Art is omnipresent, from artistic signage, piles of art-making materials, and



multiple expressions of creativity in various media. These unique urban characteristics resonate with the Island's core subcultures, making each feel more deeply at home here than in the generic fabric of the surrounding city. For the rest of us, this unique character makes the experience more memorable, authentic, and interesting.

## THE URBAN MAGNET EQUATION AND GRANVILLE ISLAND'S FUTURE

The six elements of an Urban Magnet constitute an equation necessary for creating a place with the power to attract an activity subculture. Places missing or weak in any of these elements may still be more attractive to the subculture than the generic urban fabric, but that attraction will be weaker and the overall experience less interesting and authentic.

The success of Granville Island cannot be taken for granted. Its subcultures are the secret of its past success and remain the key to its future. If CMHC inadvertently allows some of the elements that attract its core subcultures to weaken or disappear, its attraction to those subcultures will decline rapidly. Without those people, it won't be the same place.

In conventional commercial spaces, a focus on the consumer often leads to success. The paradox of Granville Island is that a focus on the consumer could destroy it. Instead, it needs to focus more deeply on the producer – and the consumers will come.

## THE URBAN MAGNET CHALLENGE FOR GRANVILLE ISLAND'S FUTURE AND BEYOND

At the core of Urban Magnets is the concept that physical form is less important than the unique subcultural social capital created by the people that use the space. The success of Granville Island is dependent not on its shoppers, but its producers – the subculture groups (artists, boaters, food producers, performers, etc.) who animate the place.

Because the Island fails on many traditional urban success factors such as visibility and access, if CMHC does not continually revitalize and deepen attraction of the Island to its core subcultures, the magnetism and success of the whole Island may erode.

Granville Island has now lost one of its anchor tenants, Emily Carr University of

Art and Design – a cornerstone its powerful artist subculture. It now needs to find new members of the arts sector to fill this void.

CMHC also needs to deepen the artisan production, education, and event dimensions of its food and beverage sector, so that it can differentiate itself from the wave of unique food and beverage culture places growing across Vancouver, including in conventional grocery stores.

The marina and boating infrastructure are unique to Granville Island. However, it could easily lose its authentic boating retail and education spaces to stores willing to pay higher rents selling Canadiana to tourists (as is happening already), thereby weakening the vitality and authenticity of the Island for the marine subculture.

To counteract this effect, CMHC could strategically manage a program of cross-subsidies, where high-performing retail uses can subsidize lower revenues from artists, boat builders, food processors, and others, to keep its Urban Magnets thriving. It needs to accommodate shoppers and tourists, but focus on making the place magnetic to artists, super foodies, and boat fanatics. They are the reason the tourists come. Pressure has been growing amongst tenants on the Island to have more say in how the Island is managed and the direction it takes. Granville Island 2040 includes provisions for creating advisory committees drawn from its main sectors – arts, food, the market, innovation, and others. In order to remain lively, current, ever-evolving, and deeply connected to its animating subcultures, it needs to empower those groups and subcultures to help shape its evolution on a continuous basis.

## LESSONS FOR OTHER COMMUNITIES

Planners, as a public-oriented group, often tend to focus on creating places that are inclusive.<sup>4</sup> While we can create places that have attractive characteristics (as per most downtown design guidelines), they are often highly 'generic.' As such, while these spaces may be functional and not unattractive, they often have a low 'magnetism' factor to the kinds of people who could uniquely animate a downtown and make it truly interesting.

Making your downtown look like every other downtown through generic downtown revitalization programs is unlikely to be a key to success. Granville Island demonstrates

the importance of embracing the authentic eccentricities of a community's subcultures and placing them in the foreground of urban planning, programming, and design. The key to the success of your downtown lies beyond attracting customers. It is about attracting interesting people to make, sell, and do things that are interesting to others. After that, the customers will come, not just once, but again and again, and from far away.

Granville Island is powerful proof that by shaping areas to deeply cater to specific subcultures, they can become vital, attractive, and inclusive. Urban Magnets is a concept for special places where we want to create a high level of unique vitality. It is not a concept for planning large areas. We can have many Urban Magnets in one area, and we can (and should) have Magnets across all areas of a city, but it is not a prescription for citywide planning.

There are many challenges that exist in creating Urban Magnets. Planners may conceptually embrace mixed uses, but all too often this means retail, a few offices, and residential. Residential uses are not necessary for an Urban Magnet as it is a commercial/ industrial/institutional land use concept. In some cases, residential uses may actually create a direct conflict with activities of some urban magnets, such as evening performances, music, recreation, and others.

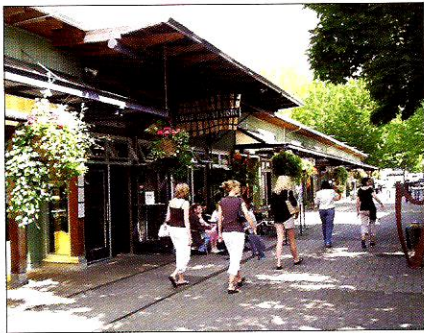
The integration of industry into mixed-use areas is an area of growing interest, particularly for regenerating struggling urban areas, so this approach could be of significant interest.<sup>5</sup> Taking a page from Granville Island, industrial areas in Canadian towns can also be better integrated into urban fabric, rather than being sent to the edges – including even heavy industry such as concrete plants. The integration of other uses, special public spaces, and food and beverage services into industrial areas, combined with a foregrounding of the industrial activity where possible for all to see, can lend a special experience, "buzz," and brand to industrial areas.

## CONCLUSION

Granville Island is a 40-year-old innovation that still offers many lessons for us today. It shows that by using the Urban Magnets equation, it is possible to create unique places for the many activity-based subcultures in our communities, places that are more interesting, economically successful and socially vibrant.

In a world where most new urban places are over-thought, over-designed, over-capitalized, and over-governed, Granville Island needs to remain a beacon as a slightly 'un-finished, exploratory, surprising, and authentic' place for subcultures. The Granville Island 2040 plan outlines a path to potentially achieve this goal and maintain and increase the Island's viability and refresh its vision.

Granville Island has, through supporting an unvarnished expression of diverse subcultures, offered a physical example of how interesting the downtowns of Canadian towns could be if our physical form truly reflected the lifestyles, activities, social



patterns, aesthetics, and identities of our great Canadian "subcultural" mosaic.

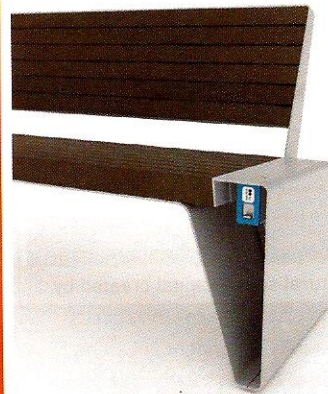
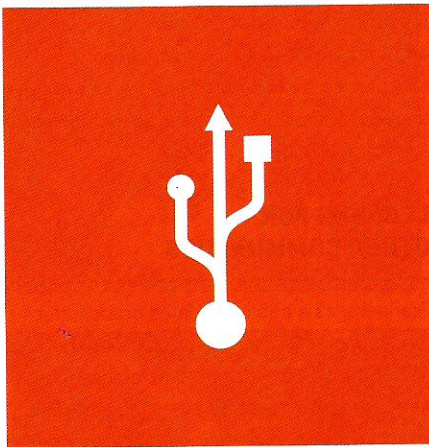
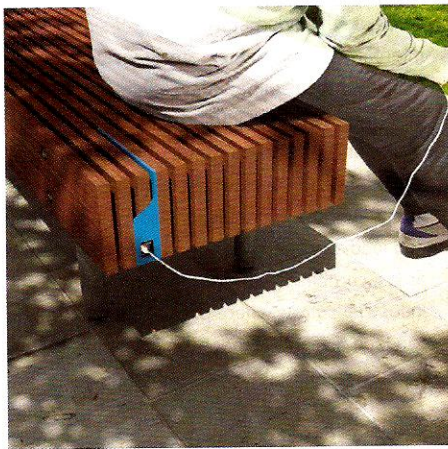
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