

SEA SQUARE

Vancouverites like to move.

In many cultures around the world people are drawn to their public squares to linger. Italians or French will sip a tiny coffee, have a smoke, enjoy a glass of wine or just watch the world go by. We're more drawn by 30 kilometres of Seawall or our views of the mountains... or on to them. Do we create our environment, or does our environment create us? Do we lack a great public square because we haven't desired one? Or has the lack of one denied us the need.

Cultures change. Outdoor patios have flourished in Vancouver in the last decade. There are more pedestrians on the street than ever. Smaller squares are becoming more popular. But for a public square, "The Public Square", to be successful it must be located where the people are. We examined many sites in and around downtown Vancouver. Many had great potential, but had few people on the surrounding streets. Some had lots of people but poor sun exposure or poor surrounding architecture. A square isn't just a square. It is defined by the elements which surround it and the people who occupy it.

The corner of Robson and Granville is the cross-roads between downtown businesses, shopping, residential and cultural zones. It is thriving with pedestrian activity and is welcoming to all. But it has one enormous problem. It has been desecrated with a huge monolithic white box that dehumanizes the space. Removing this giant eyesore would be a massive improvement by itself. But returning the space to the people would be a dramatic and positive change for downtown and the citizens of Vancouver. The location has good sun exposure and wonderful vistas of some of Vancouver's most stunning architecture. It can be relatively intimate for smaller crowds or expandable to encompass Robson Square and Granville Mall.

Vancouverites have a special relationship with nature. It is not surprising that Greenpeace was founded here. We love our forested and snow capped mountains. We are protective of our parks, green spaces and even our surrounding farm lands. We tend to be sceptical of development and urbanization even while being over-run by it. We have an appreciation of our urban spaces, both new and old, but nature tends to win our hearts.

This proposal, Sea Square, attempts to reflect this aspect of our culture. It also attempts to challenge us. It is not just a square that says nothing: it makes a bold statement. It is not just a symbol of our love of nature and our scepticism of the urban environment, but is a commentary on our consumerism, our lack of sustainability and the challenges that the future holds. It evokes history, art and the connection between humans and nature. It is meant to provoke debate and challenge our preconceived ideas. And it gives us a space in which to reflect on those things.

Sea Square suggests nature striking back, consuming a temple of our consumerism. The building currently occupied by Sears would be reduced to a third its former size as if being returned to Mother Nature. Climbing vines would ascend the broken façade while a green roof would top the structure. The square surface itself, displaying the original building's structural grid, will also appear as a broken ruin allowing vegetation to grow through. And the name Sea Square, for a space in the middle of downtown, high above sea level is a reminder of the impending challenges of global warming and rising sea-levels.

But Sea Square isn't just about controversy and challenge. It is a space that will function very well as Vancouver's pre-eminent public square. It will be lively and dynamic at all hours of the day but will also offer spaces to linger and watch the hustle and bustle. It invites people to cross through it, creating an interesting shortcut, a break from our relentless grid of streets. Stairs in the sun and a long row of raised and staggered patios give a place to stop and breathe, to eat, drink and socialize. A giant chess board and bocce pitch gives us an excuse to stick around, entertain and be entertained. A permanent raised and covered stage area allows space for musicians, performers, speakers and activists. A scattering of trees and the "ruins" of the former building offer shelter from sun and rain. But the square's generally open space is flexible for a myriad of uses from farmer's markets to concerts to sculptural displays.

A temporary large event stage and back stage can be positioned to suit any event from movie screenings to symphony orchestras. The center of the square has been left clear to maximize flexibility and maintain sight lines to the two stage areas. For large events surrounding streets can be closed to expand the square to more than double its size. The City of Vancouver has already designated the adjacent block of Granville to be closed for special events. Robson has minor traffic volumes and can be closed fairly readily. Howe Street poses a bigger challenge but could be closed for rare large events.

The adjacent Robson Square can be used for ancillary event uses such a food stands and crafts markets. It offers space for information and first aid. The roadway at that location can be the staging area for emergency services, positioned back and out of the main crowds with good access to Saint Paul's Hospital.

Sea Square is roughly 250' x 250' or 62,000 square feet. While it is roughly square it is not symmetrical. It breaks away from the formal to reflect Vancouver's relaxed and informal nature. A sense of the diagonal is maintained to encourage shortcutting through the space

The Sea Square proposal also suggests the remainder of the Sears building be used as the new home of the Vancouver Art Gallery. This is a superior location to the current proposal at the Plaza of Nations which is too far from the center of the city. This would leave the current VAG building as a home for The Vancouver Museum which would solidify the area as a centre of culture. Of course the square would function equally well if those buildings are used for other purposes. But the ground floor of the remaining building should be reserved for semi-public spaces such as restaurants, delis, cafes and bars whose patios would open to the square at the tops of the stairs.

Sea Square is central, easily accessible and close to transit. Both the Expo/Millennium Line and Canada Line have stations within about a block. It is also comfortably distant from most residential buildings. Both noise and crowds could overwhelm a residential area. The wide sidewalks of Granville Mall and the adjacent Robson Square will help to disperse crowds after an event.

This is a controversial proposal. It very much fits our challenging times. We are at a turning point in the history of humanity and many challenges lie ahead. Sea Square attempts to expose those challenges and embodies some of the solutions: social interaction, dialogue, reconnection with nature and simply to add joy to life.

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