

ROBSON SQUARE 2: a serious idea for the Sears site

Design / Concept:

The design concept originates from a desire to find a site at the junction of key pedestrian routes within the City's downtown. The concept evolved through an analysis of prominent pedestrian patterns, revealing this site as a significant location. Along one axis is Robson Street - arguably the most dynamic street within downtown due to a high level of pedestrian activity. Along the other axis is Granville Street - currently undergoing public realm upgrades that will make it a key public amenity and build upon the energy that this street already possesses.

This submission responds to these key pedestrian desire lines and proposes a square that will build upon the continued success these streets, while providing a much needed public space that gleams its energy from surrounding uses including the VAG, a new Vancouver City Centre (VCC) transit station, Robson Square and proposed 'edge' buildings. Fundamental to the design is the introduction of a transit walkway through the square, connecting the new VCC station with the existing Robson Square thereby re-energizing this iconic public space.

Location and Context:

The square is bounded by the City's most energetic public spaces - Granville Street to the south, Robson Street to the west, Robson Square to the north, and new 'edge buildings' to the east (comprised of a mixture of the new Sears store, expanded VAG (therefore remaining in situ), a new Performing Arts Theatre Company, and commercial building). Given the surrounding built form, the square maintains favourable solar access.

While the square occupies the site of the current Sears building, it effectively extends beyond the footprint of the existing building. To the south, the Future Shop building creates a strong backdrop while to the north the historic façade of the VAG frames the square and provides a strong point of orientation. The transit walkway is oriented from the station through a new station house, to the centre of the new and existing Gallery steps on Robson.

The current Sears building occupies more space than is currently required. This design proposes to decant the department store into a new, more efficient building within the suite of 'edge buildings' to free up the space for the square. The store's existing parking and servicing levels below grade would remain and would be used as storage and staging space for the square.

The square is located immediately adjacent to the new VCC station and uses this as a design driver – a new transit walkway splits the square into two zones adding a perpetual sense of movement and human activity to the square. It also makes the square accessible to Vancouverites far beyond the immediate vicinity arriving here by transit. The square, in effect, acts as a grand arrival point, a grand station.

Response to Design Criteria:

This entry directly responds to the criteria outlined in the brief as follows:

Size/Dimension/Location

- The square is not restricted or bounded by vertical elements in the landscape but rather responds to the design criteria of a 'great room' of useable and flexible space. It is large enough to accommodate the 5,000 person requirement.
- Land uses and "edge buildings" around the square support a vibrant and animated space – the history and programming potential of the VAG mix with a new, dynamic Performing Arts/Theatre building to provide a continued sense of movement; a new Granville Street brings growing excitement and significance to Vancouver's public realm; Robson Street continues to play the role of the social centre for the City; and the existing Robson Square, along with its architectural relevance, will continue as one of the most well used passive spaces for people-watching.

Utility

- The existing mall and parking levels under the square provide the perfect opportunity for a staging area for events and for storage and servicing. The 'Square Building' has direct access to these subterranean spaces which can be brought up to the main square as needed. (accessibility from Howe remains)
- The square can be apportioned in a variety of ways depending on the requirements of the day, and can have a variety of public, intimate, assembly, performance, and passive spaces. Infinitely scalable, the square can host both a grand celebration and an intimate conversation.
- The main square has been conceived of being largely open to the elements, however certain design moves have been made to address Vancouver's propensity for rain – the area in front of the Performing Arts building has been designed to accommodate a light tensile covering, allowing for the performance space to be used year round without competing architecturally with other, more dominant elements of the square; the transit walkway alternates between coverage given by the 'bridges' and open air but can be completely covered if necessary.

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Accessibility

- The square has been designed with minimal yet notable grade changes. A gentle grass berm and wooden boardwalk provide natural relief to the largely hard space, bounded on the west by a linear grove of trees and connect eastward via wooden 'bridges'. The western portion of the square has no grade changes but extends directly from Robson Street thereby making the entire square accessible. The range of public to passive spaces means users can choose to participate or retreat from the public realm.
- The square is above the new Canada Line station, opening up an additional access to the station with the walkway connecting the station with a new entry at Robson Square.

Programming and Sociability

- 'Vancouverness' – transit element as design driver, trees and natural environment marking pathways and routes, repairing and 'righting wrongs', respecting the architectural significance of Robson Square, with contextual additions of stairway from Robson and station house that reflects the architects' own renovation vision.
- Programming flexibility – VAG events and programs utilizing the square; Performing Arts Theatre activating the square with interior movement and human activity and engaging the square with flexible outdoor stage and performance space on the 'boardwalk'; market zone/festival tents catering to local farmer's markets or art shows; dialogue screen enabling night-time projected movies or social messaging; open space (hard space) that is currently lacking in Vancouver that can accommodate both planned and unplanned events.
- Spontaneity – multiple spaces within the broader space that foster spontaneous activities (dancing, playing, colouring)

Square Features:

- The Gallery2: VAG Gallery expansion on east edge, program space on boardwalk
- Dialogue Screen: projected against, shows, messaging
- Supporting Cast (buildings): commercial tower, Sears building, commercial retail space
- Performing Arts/Theatre Co.: outdoor performance, robust building edge with stage, human activity at edge
- Station Walk: open air connection between VCC station and Robson Square; tree lined; slightly lower level but still connected visually to square activities; public art walk
- VCC Station access: connecting concourse of station with Robson Square by way of 'station walk'
- The Bridges: connecting points between the main square and boardwalk; area of repose; intimate space
- Square Building: functional space for supporting activities such as retail, ticket sales, food; connected to lower levels for staging, servicing, etc
- The Square: main square space; flexible, large space, seating, lighting; extension of Robson and Granville Streets; large public room
- The Boardwalk: extension of VAG Gallery; moveable chairs; wood decking with stormwater addressed on site; dance floor
- Market Edge: festival tents; market stalls; art display; flexible and programmable
- The Steps: addition of steps on west side of Robson; forms geometric terminus of station walk
- Robson Square Station House: new station access; vibrancy to existing key public space; new stairs directly from Robson; complements existing architecture
- The Berm: angled grassed berm; maximum solar access; soothing texture; sitting, watching, waiting, relaxing

Programming (and relevant aspects of the social use of the space):

The square has been conceived to be highly flexible, and to allow for a variety of programmed and unprogrammed space. The east side of the square, the Boardwalk, is the most programmed space, with VAG activities, Performing Arts activities, projected films, etc occurring here. The west side of the square is the least programmed, providing a large space that can be used for a variety of activities – the relationship of this space to the adjoining Robson and Granville streets, makes this a key useable space. 'The Bridges' offer the least programmed, most intimate spaces.

The key driver is a social space that repairs a current missed opportunity, allows for celebration and gathering, is the nexus of critical pedestrian routes through Downtown, and receives its geometrics from the transit connection and the surrounding buildings. Given the diversity of activity that can occur here, the reality of the current building tenants make this concept one that will surely give rise to Vancouver's grand square.

Where is the square? The square is here.