Downtown Nanaimo Urban Design Plan
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Commissioned by Friends of Plan Nanaimo from
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Acknowledgements

Charles and Frances Christopherson

It started with Charlie’s Walk, September 2003. To Charles Christopherson is owed the appreciation for having stepped up to fill the role of local expert, for keeping an eye over the project, and for acting as project-central for a host of unrelated activities that culminated with the Downtown Nanaimo Charrette hosted by Friends of Plan Nanaimo.

Debra L. Bodner

Debra spearheaded this effort to get the vision and meaning of place right. As planner for the charrette, and urban design plan, she researched archival collections, local by-laws, and planning policy, then edited the Urban Design Plan.

Don Stone

Founder of Friends of Plan Nanaimo, the group that championed for a missing community review process, Don called for the Downtown Nanaimo Charrette. Through his efforts, new methods in urbanism were brought to shape the future of Nanaimo’s historic downtown.
New Theatre Entry on Plaza
Dallas Square Reinstated
Terminal Ave. Revitalization
New Hotel on Esplanade (Winfield Crescent)
Lubbock Square Revitalization
Foot of Commercial Street
Victoria Crescent Built-out
Flat Iron Buildings
Streetwall Urbanism
Front Steet • Middle Lane • Waterfront Walkway
The Downtown Blocks
Pygmy Pavilion Square

Downtown Nanaimo Urban Design Plan Images
The genesis of this plan was an urban walk, Charlie’s Walk (see Acknowledgements page), prepared among friends in September 2003. The next year, a research trip to the U.K. and France by LNV included visits to Georgian Urbanism’s most notable sites (London, Bath & Edinburgh) and precedents (Paris & the City of Versailles).

The need to formalize an urban design plan crystallized over a 5 day period in 2004 when city council announced the removal of a 15 storey height restriction in the downtown blocks on a Thursday, then a referendum for the New Nanaimo Centre and bonused Foundry-Civic Arena site on the following Monday (Appendices A & B).

These proposals seemed so far out of touch with the community values represented by Nanaimo’s historic past that commissioning a full urban design analysis seemed to be the only recourse left to us.

The process for drafting the plan followed the latest urban design methods and methodology. The Downtown Nanaimo Charrette was held October 15 - 17 at the Port Place Mall. Just 20 days later, on November 4th, the Downtown Nanaimo Urban Design Plan was presented to a packed house of more than 400 at the Bastion Hotel’s ballroom. Those in attendance greeted the plan with a standing ovation.

On November 20th, 2004 the referendum passed by a narrow margin (52 - 48%).

In 1913 Nanaimo’s urbanism was only surpassed in British Columbia by Vancouver, Victoria and New Westminster. A slower rate of growth in Nanaimo has meant that many of the outstanding features awaiting rediscovery here are no longer extant in the other sites.

The hope of this plan is that 140 years after the original platting (1862-64), with a century of modernism behind us, a new appreciation may flower in the community for the values represented in the original plan. This urban design plan, as a compendium of principles complementing the visionary act of fitting a townsite on this incredible natural setting (see 1.0 - 1.13), will empower the community to reinterpret the 1864 plan anew on the way to realizing a new century of build out (2.0 - 2.9).

We hope to show with this document that the vision of the original plan remains current: building a high density, low-rise village urbanism where human-scaled streetwalls articulate a connected sequence of streets and village squares (1.4, 2.1, 4.0). Old and new respect, celebrate, and complement one another as human scale is rediscovered in the walking experience of place. We seek to curb any excess that may arise from not understanding the plan—including the penchant to erect towers and big boxes—as we demonstrate the many opportunities available for continuing to build this superlative urban artifact (1.3.1, 3.1.1, 4.1.1, 4.2 - 4.6, 5.0, 6.0).

Each new square, and each new building, will make more palpable a central spine—main street—stringing together a series of urban rooms (1.7, 4.0); all of it fronting a natural harbour whose original contours one would hope to reclaim (1.1, 3.1, 3.2, 5.2); ultimately, linking to an urban park every bit the equal of the very best traditions of city design (5.3). Thus, we will achieve in Nanaimo an urban whole greater than the sum of its parts as a community setting to be enjoyed and revered by all who care to visit, or call it home.
In tower neighborhoods...

- Streets (and the waterfront walk) are in perpetual shadow
- Pedestrians feel diminished by the super scale buildings
- Views for those living up the slope are forever compromised

In low-rise, high-density neighborhoods...

- It is possible to meet or exceed tower densities
- Buildings are low enough to allow sunlight penetration to the sidewalk
- Buildings terrace up hills conserving views, and making vistas available to the upper-storey residents on every block
- Municipal revenues are matched or exceeded over the long term
- Cost savings result from avoiding safety and security problems normally associated with tower neighborhoods
- Traffic congestion is reduced by spreading the vehicle and parking loads more widely
- Traffic calming results because streets have human scale

Downtown Nanaimo Charrette Findings

1. The proposal for a conference center, hotel, auditorium and museum complex on Commercial and Gordon Streets ignores established urban design principles.

2. By using urban design principles for planning a high-density, low-rise neighborhood in downtown Nanaimo, the resulting urban quality will far exceed anything that is possible to achieve with towers.

3. It is possible to build 5,000 residential units in the downtown blocks without building anything larger than the townhouses on Wesley Street (3.5 stories).

4. Towers in the irregular, downtown blocks are out of scale, and character. In addition, they will block views (see San Francisco Urban Design Principle opposite).

The San Francisco Urban Design Principle (illustrated above) suggests that towers belong on the crests of hills, where they augment the natural contours of the land, achieve spectacular views, yet minimize view blockage for neighbors. Located at the base of a slope, towers block views all the way up the hill, and ‘flatten’ the profile of the city vis-a-vis the natural contours of the landscape.
Downtown Nanaimo Urban Design Plan: Revitalization and Infill Policy Statement

1. Designate a Revitalization District consisting of all building lots comprising the “downtowns blocks” of the 1864 Nanaimo Plan.

2. Use the Revitalization District to:
   (a) Enhance the livability of place; and
   (b) Conserve Nanaimo’s historic urban artifacts including its buildings, public open spaces, and the legacy represented by the special features originating in the 1864 Nanaimo Plan.

3. Adopt the Downtown Nanaimo Urban Design Plan as the guiding document for Downtown Development.
1.0 1864 Town Plan

The Hudson’s Bay Company (HBC) established mining operations in Nanaimo in 1852. Ten years later, the townsite and mine holdings totalling 6,193 acres, were sold to the Vancouver Coal Mining and Land Company (VCM&LC; see inset plan). In 1864 building lots were sold at auction in Victoria (Luxton, 1998).

As early as the time of the sale of the HBC townsite (1862), or as late as the auction of lots in Victoria (1864), a legal survey and plan must have been made in order to guide legal transfer and trading in real estate. Thus, the plan that is most often referred to as “prepared by George Deverill in England from contour maps” (Luxton) must have come into existence either at the behest of the HBC, or as a commission from the VCM&LC. If the latter, the Nanaimo Townsite Plan dates from 1862-64.

The first reworking of the original plan may have come after Robert Dunsmuir received the commission to build the Esquimalt & Nanaimo Railway in 1883, shown on the plan opposite as a grey meandering line passing next to Lubbock Square (2) in the exact location it occupies today. The earliest plan available in the Nanaimo Archives is dated 1881.
1.1 An “unusual radial street pattern”...

The 1862-64 plan’s distinctive radiating street pattern (2) is well documented among Nanaimo’s characteristic features: In addition to the significant building stock, other characteristics combine to give Nanaimo’s Downtown its unique flavour, including its *unusual radial street pattern*, the distinctive small scale and proportions of the buildings, the relationship of the buildings to the street, the unbroken street facades of Commercial Street and Victoria Crescent, and the use of materials, particularly brick. (Luxton, 1998: p. 131; italics ours)

The 1862-4 plan’s radial pattern is very unusual (2), yet experts have focused on this part of the original plan to the exclusion of the other, just as remarkable area: the non-radial, irregular downtown blocks (1).

Nanaimo’s original plan, therefore, has two distinct areas:
- Radial streets in the periphery (2) focusing the axis of its principal streets on street-end views of the water in the bay;
- Irregular downtown streets in the core (1) laid out according to picturesque, or hill-town planning principles.

Thus, the downtown is buttoned-up, business savvy, Sunday-best village urbanism. The radial streets extend into a residential landscape intended for single houses on garden lots, with a few local stores providing the essentials within easy walking distance.

The *urban core* (1) was laid out according to traditional, western European village urbanism, and is exquisitely tailored for a walking experience of place. The *sub-urban periphery* (2) embraced the then new theory of the garden suburbs. Although an uptown-downtown dichotomy can be observed in other historic town-sites of the period, this contrast between picturesque core and radial periphery is unmatched.

A third plan element, the landfill blocks (3), may be later than the 1940’s. Their super-block scale disrupts the human scale of the original plan, robing the original of its intended waterfront focus.

Thus, Port Place Mall, Front Street, Terminal Avenue, and Gordon Street still lack a better integration with the whole.
1.2 Pedestrian Shed Analysis

The fundamental fact of urbanism is the pedestrian shed: a circle with a radius equal to a 5 minute walk, usually given as a quarter mile, 20 chain, or 400 meters. It represents the baseline measure of how far most folks will walk: human scale in urbanism. Nanaimo’s principal street, Front Street, was originally one quarter mile long with one end closed, and one open to the mountain view north (Bodner, 2004).

Opposite, five quarter-mile radius circles are overlaid on the original plan. The red circle in the middle is centered on Dallas Square, demonstrating that it is the ‘heart’ of the plan. The coincidence of a central pedestrian shed with the irregular ‘downtown blocks’ presents a remarkable circumstance carefully tailored to the unique topographic features of this landscape. We see it as the driving intention in platting of the original townsite plan.

The downtown blocks are unique. Our recommendation is that the ‘downtown blocks’ be conserved, and then strengthened, with future infill development as a distinct district within the original town plan. A place be defined by the experience of walking in its twisting, turning streets.
1.3 The Down-town Blocks

Block pattern analysis of the 1891 plan is overlaid on a contemporary photograph. Light blue areas show the extent of subsequent fill altering the coastline.

Dark red areas show the ‘downtown blocks’. These are building lots on the original plan that are within easy walking distance of Dallas Square (A). Dark blue areas show the beginning of the garden lots on the periphery.

The legacy of this plan is comprised in equal amounts by the strength and coherence of the original core peninsula blocks A, and the orthogonal character of the radiating peripheral blocks growing beyond A, B, C, D and E.

A: The original downtown core lots are isolated on the escarpment, a peninsular rock outcropping nearly surrounded by water.

B - E: South, a series of closes and crescents comprise a set of residential areas within easy walking distance of the downtown.

F: Further south, Deverill Square, now a school ground, exists on the 1881 Greenfield Map (earliest available plan at the Nanaimo Archives).

G: North, Newcastle Townsite is a distinct enclave with a square block pattern growing from mirrored, triangular gateway blocks platted circa 1891.

Three bridges link downtown:

a. Stewart Avenue Bridge
b. Bastion Street Bridge
c. Commercial Street ‘long’ Bridge
1.3.1 Block Shapes

Block shapes in the downtown peninsula respond to the contours of the land, but show clear intension to create streetwall effects. Chapel Street widens on the east side (north is to the right in this plan orientation) in a deliberate attempt to create a concavity in the streetwall that will show buildings on lots 1, 3, 4 to good effect and lot 2 as a center. On site, this coincides with dramatic vistas west over the ravine. The deflection in the lot lines opposite (15, 16, 17) close the street end vista. The siting, if not size, of “St. Pauls Church”—shown occupying the Land Building’s current location—is every bit an echo of Wren’s St. Paul’s in London.

On Church Street, the dog-leg turn responds to the gently downsloping terrain, setting up lot 12 as a street end vista (The Modern Cafe). Lot 6, across St. Paul’s Church, is the site of the Nanaimo Opera House (demolished in the 1930’s, see “4.1 Dallas Square” for photo). Its relationship to Dallas Square is driving the platting: standing in the square, the dog leg closes the street vista maintaining the continuity of enclosure or streetwall for the urban room.

Note how each end of Skinner forming an inside corner, is a deliberate attempt to set up memorable urban spaces by bending of the streetwall. Lots 7 and 17, Block LII (north or right end of Skinner) Have changed appreciably from the 1881 to 1891 Plans. Terminal Avenue would be built on the land filled inlet then slicing diagonally along Lots 1-7 of Block XLI to align with Franser Street.

Plans courtesy Nanaimo Archives
1.4 Urban Spaces

The clear existence of an urban, downtown district made of squares and bending streets that turn as they climb or descend the hilly terrain has been overlooked since the very early decades of the 20th century.
1.5 Plan Features

The design of a town plan begins with laying out main streets, typically following the contours of the land, favoring views, solar orientation, and protecting against the prevailing winds. On hilly sites the most prominent lots are placed on ridges or hilltops. Next, a network of streets is created establishing block dimensions. Finally, the blocks are platted into building lots for sale. In extraordinary cases, the street pattern is fitted around a series of special features or ‘events’ gathered from the landscape and used to figure the city.

These features render the walking experience of place with a visual lexicon that is immediately sensed without need for explanation. The Nanaimo plan is rich in examples of this type chosen from the best features of western town planning. The diagram opposite shows the resulting figuration of public open space, including:

- Crescents, closes and residential squares;
- A village square as ‘heart’;
- Pedestrian Links, and
- A urban spine connecting all three

Two systems linking the downtown to other neighborhoods are also diagramed:

- A system of connected parks
- A transit loop

Each of these will be explained individually in the next pages, along with three other characteristic features of the downtown blocks not shown in the diagram:

- Elongated blocks
- Flat-iron lots
- Deflected and closed street end vistas

The presence of any one of these features in the design of a neighborhood in North America would be a rarity. Thus, their combined use in Nanaimo’s 1864 plat is utterly remarkable.

These urbanistic features should count among the cultural artefacts to be conserved, including many all but forgotten until now.
1.6 Urban Spine

A continuous urban spine extends from Front Street, through Dallas Square, down Church and Commercial Streets, then along Victoria Crescent to the forgotten Winfield Crescent at the foot of the unrecognized Close. As early as 1867 a railway was built along part of this route carrying coal from the Park Head Slope, along Victoria Crescent, over the ‘Long Bridge’ connecting to Commercial Street, then right on Wharf to the original Hudson’s Bay coal jetty reached by a trestle built at the foot of Wharf Street (Luxton, 1998). Linking three districts, the urban character of this spine is established by concrete and measurable criteria which should be inventoried, then respected and strengthened by subsequent construction:

- Continuous streetwall, curving on the crescents
- Consistent lot widths, producing building façades of harmonious scale
- Streetwall height (two or three stories)
- Proportion and rhythm of openings, consistent among buildings of different periods
- Buildings set perpendicular to the streetwall

1.7 Urban Rooms

The quality of Nanaimo’s urban spine is greatly augmented by a number of urban rooms found along its path. This can be reinforced by creating new urban spaces, squares, and crescents. Civic, Gordon, Pygmy, and Harbourfront squares are shown as additions to the original spine. The first three are new proposals shown here for the first time.

**Original Urban Rooms**
1. Deverill Square
2. Milford Crescent
3. Winfield Crescent & Close
4. Victoria Crescent
5. Dallas Square
6. Lubbock Square

**Proposed Squares:**
7. Civic Square
8. Gordon Square
9. Harbourfront Plaza
10. Pygmy Square

The spine can extend north to reach Newcastle Townsite (Stewart Avenue), then Newcastle Island; and south to reach Deverill Square and Milford Crescent. Lubbock Square, outside the downtown core, would have its role strengthened if it were to become a commuter station hub offering new neighborhood services, and intensification sites.
1.8 Flat-Iron Lots

Among the figures platted on the original Nanaimo Plan is a series of so-called flat-iron sites. These were named after the early, triangular clothing iron, but are in reality the hallmark of the then contemporary Napoleon III-Haussmann interventions in Paris, copied in London at Eight Points. In Nanaimo, the later introduction of Terminal Avenue, intersecting the original plan at an angle, created additional triangular shaped building lots.

The flat-iron building form presents challenges to the designers, even as it offers significant visual and vista advantages to the tenants, property owners, and pedestrians. Thus, building out triangular lots with triangular buildings creates instant landmarks in the city, and should be encouraged, even bonused.

The sheer quantity of these sites in the Nanaimo downtown blocks suggests that at full build out the city might become known as a city of ‘flat-iron’ buildings. The resulting urban spaces present challenges that will require special review and permitting if they are to achieve good pedestrian priority.

1.9 Crescents

The crescents are a second feature in the original plan meant to determine the shape of the resulting built form. Three have been found in maps available locally, dating back to 1881:

1. Milford Crescent
2. Winfield Crescent (not signed or recognized)
3. Victoria Crescent

If the relationship of Victoria and Winfield crescents to the harbor, and to the urban spine, were intentional actions made platting the original plan, then its vision was for paired radial streets terminating in crescents fronting the harbor with curving streetwalls.

Alan B. Jacobs says of London’s crescent Regent Street, “The curve gives a sense of closure, a sense of place. It is one of the few places where one can examine both a concave and a convex street.” (Great Streets, 1993. p. 162). Of course, Nanaimo is one more of those few places.

Whether all radial street pairs would terminate in crescents is another matter. No evidence of this can be found on locally available plans (dated 1881 & 1891).
1.10 Closed and Deflected Street End Vistas

Among the most celebrated features of western urbanism are the closed street end vistas that result from T-intersections, and the deflected street end vistas created when a street turns slightly—or more dramatically still—bends in a crescent shape.

Each of these platting decisions has the effect of setting a particular building lot, or a set of lots, in a special visual relationship to persons walking along the street.

Lots that terminate or deflect street vistas in the downtown blocks are shown opposite. As can be seen at a glance, Nanaimo’s downtown blocks are replete with these effects. However, in order for the effects to be appreciated buildings must be massed on the perimeter of the block, building a streetwall.

In other words, buildings must be built without set back from the street. The resulting ‘streetwall’ then takes on the shape of the blocks platted, and the most important legacy of the 1864 Plan is finally realized.

1.11 Elongated Blocks

The shape of the downtown blocks is remarkable. Elongated, and often platted as one-building-lot deep (see 2.5 Nanaimo Terrace on Flat-Iron & Irregular Lots), they result from two flats: first, follow the natural contours of the rocky escarpment; then, generate the closed and deflected street end vistas just discussed.

Thus, the downtown blocks present the characteristics most revered in the western tradition—those of the hill town. Fitted out with all the amenities necessary to create the core of a modern city, Nanaimo’s narrow, turning, bending downtown streets create the best walking experience possible. The experience is strongest on the narrowest streets, Chapel and Skinner, or along the length of its superb spine, Church-Commercial-Victoria-Winfield.

Since these same characteristics are used to tame traffic, the downtown blocks form an urban neighborhood combining the best of walking environments with the highest standards of livability.
1.12 New Squares

Among the many remarkable features of Nanaimo’s original 1862-4 plan is the existence of a square, Dallas Square, at its geographic center, near the waterfront, according to Vitruvius (Bk. I, Ch. VII).

This tradition of making squares or urban rooms a neighborhood focus, as well as a special people place, can become a central theme shaping Nanaimo’s downtown revitalization. To this end, new squares have been proposed in key places (see plan):

1. Civic Square
2. Gordon Square
3. Port Place Squares
4. Pygmy Square

Among them, a new Civic Square is proposed linking City Hall (1951) to the Nanaimo-Duncan Utilities Building (1941). Of moderne and art deco styles respectively, these structures square off across the ravine presenting natural terminations for an urban room, providing an impetus for taming traffic on Terminal, and enhancing the number and quality of pedestrian links across Terminal to the downtown blocks.

1.13 Pedestrian Links

Downtown’s elongated blocks, and the ravine occupied by Terminal Avenue, present the need to build pedestrian links if this unique plan is to achieve the same level of connectivity and convenience associated with grid plans. The China Steps, and the alley linking Commercial to the Pygmy Pavilion, are extant examples of this practice. Other pedestrian links known to be in existence have had their access points blocked and should be reopened.

On the Terminal Avenue ravine possibilities include new bridges, either vehicular or pedestrian, and the new Civic Square, both developing new pedestrian links to the downtown. Pedestrian links can also take the form of shopping arcades: short, thru-block, covered corridors that are well lit and may be gated off after hours. The arcades can be lined with shops, residential entry points, hotel lobbies, etc. Their precedent in urbanism dates from the same period when Nanaimo’s original plan was platted, and includes the arcades of London and Paris of the mid 1800’s.
2.0 Built Form & Density

The irregular Downtown Blocks present a ‘best fit’ for street-fronting terrace buildings that are:

- 3 to 4.5 storey streetwall
- 1 car per 800 sq.ft.
- Multiple ownership/tenancy options

The plan opposite shows 1360 unit footprints each measuring 16.5 x 50 feet, or 800 square feet (gross unit area).

Build-out at 4.5 stories yields 6120 units. At 3.5 storeys, the yield is 4,760 units. The population supported could be up to 12,000 people living within easy walking distance of Commercial Street.
2.1 Streetwall

The remarkable quality of Nanaimo’s architecture is measured in terms of its human scale, continuity of character, and variations of form in the streetwall of the downtown blocks.
2.2 The Nanaimo Terrace: Typical Unit Plans with Exiting

The 16.5 x 50 foot typical terrace unit shares fire exit stairs with one neighbor. Note that the addition of an elevator does not significantly penalize the net area of the resulting units. A lobby or vestibule is required separating each unit from the exit stairs. The elevator can reach a common parking level in the basement.
2.3 Nanaimo Terrace on Sloping Sites

- 3 to 4.5 storey streetwall
- 1 car per 800 sq.ft.
- Multiple ownership/tenancy options (see color key)

A consistent built form applied to sloping townsites can achieve terracing: Buildings that step up the slope, enabling penthouse units with “high level views”.

As shown in the diagrams, a 5% slope will raise the building on the up-slope side of the block by one storey. Construction of underground parking is also impacted on sloping sites. Pushing the parking garage forward reduces the amount of excavation required, but uses up building area.
2.4 Nanaimo Terrace on Waterfront Sites

- 3 to 4.5 storey streetwall
- 1 car per 800 sq. ft.
- Multiple ownership/tenancy options (see color key)

The Nanaimo Terrace shows its flexibility on waterfront sites. Above, the Malaspina tower is drawn to scale behind a pair of terraces of a smaller scale that makes “Middle Lane” possible.

On Front Street...
Street fronting lots develop 4.5 storey continuous streetwall. On the deeper water-side lots, the terraces set back 10 feet to achieve basement level patios on the street. On this side of the street, up to 3 stories can achieve unimpeded waterfront views.

On the Waterfront...
Stacked townhouses take advantage of a spectacular setting. Single 4.5 storey townhouses could make top market rates.

On Middle Lane...
A pedestrian priority zone, with local traffic possible, provides front door access to townhouses. Retail areas that were basement level on Front Street are loft and lane level here. Thus, a ‘paseo’ or mews evolves paralleling the Waterfront Walkway that could be accessed every 50 to 200 feet along the way. Combining steps and ramps on access points leading to Front and to the water, Middle Lane could be as fine as Santa Barbara’s ‘Street in Spain’.
Irregular downtown blocks are long, thin, curving, and often terminating on flat-iron shaped lots. Shallow block depths combine with steeply sloping sites to make possible a substantial build out suitable for terracing.

Average block depths:
- Cliff - Skinner: 140 feet
- Skinner - Chapel: 190 feet
- Chapel - Front: 220 feet
- Front - Waterfront: 150 feet
- Wallace - Terminal: 112 feet
- The Crescent: 100 feet
- The Close: 134 feet

Flat-iron building sites create instant landmarks, and have an added benefit. Triangular parcels can achieve larger floor plates suitable for prominent businesses on the ground level and apartments above. Following traditional street-wall urbanism, it will be possible to build a high-density, low-rise neighborhood on the flat-iron and irregular lots that meets or exceeds tower urbanism.
2.6 Nanaimo Terrace on Winfield Crescent and the Close

Ian Niamath, MAIBC

The view from the top of Winfield Crescent is panoramic (see photo). One gets the impression that the designer behind the original town plan chose this outcrop- ping to locate a set of building lots positioned to take in the full extent of the plan from this vantage point.

A charrette sketch study for stacked terraces tested this site’s suitability for a hotel, including:
- 240 Guest Rooms
- 30 Condominiums
- 225 Seat Auditorium
- Meeting Rooms
- 400 Parking
- Health Spa

It was felt that the proximity of this site to the waterfront, Port Place Mall, and one of the main entry points to the downtown will make it a desirable place to locate a major hotel.

As late as 1881 the Close was a green park surrounded by building lots atop Winfield Crescent. By 1891 two additional lots had been added fronting Crace Street, pinching the entrance and creating the key-hole shapped ‘close’.

View from the Close

Stacked Terraces
2.7 Nanaimo Terrace on Victoria Crescent

Jolyon (Jol) Brown, MAIBC

Getting the streetwall right on Victoria Crescent takes specific measures that can be identified in advance:

- Infill or redevelop the former Eatons site with a curving streetwall
- Construct a concave streetwall on the eastern side of Victoria Crescent
- Retain all historic buildings
- Design new streetwall to be in keeping with the scale and character of the historic fabric

Although there is continuity in the streetwall of Victoria Crescent today, complete build-out at a consistent height that respects existing historic buildings would greatly amplify the experience of ‘the sense of place’.
2.8 Nanaimo Terrace on Terminal Avenue

Jol Brown MAIBC

A pedestrian bridge connects 4.5 storey mixed-use terraces over a traffic calmed Terminal Avenue to the downtown blocks. This is an important case study for revitalization. The trigger for new construction here is the municipality redefining the existing urban quality by redesigning the street. New residential development builds out fronting the new pavements, sidewalks, rows of trees, canal, medians, etc., that represent a competitive advantage for private sector investment.

Bottom: Charrette Street Sections show alternatives on an 80 foot
2.9 Historic Buildings

Historic buildings belong on their original sites. This universally recognized principle has to do with creating the ‘meaning of place’. Buildings were created in one place, and not another, due to real and practical reasons that can be understood long after their original use has ceased to function.

The proposal to demolish this building and put something else in its place is senseless. West Coast industrial sheds are eminently reusable, as Vancouver’s Granville Island has demonstrated. This can be a new community center, an art school, a skating rink, just about anything one can imagine. The way that the street level has risen to meet this building requires reworking.

In Nanaimo, it is very important to understand that historic buildings that shape the streetwall on Church, Commercial and Victoria Crescent (see photo opposite) should be retained in order to maintain the scale and rhythm of the Nanaimo’s memorable urban spine.
3.0 Hierarchy of Street Spaces

Nanaimo’s downtown blocks have streets of varying widths and lengths. While street widths have widened since 1864 (for example on Commercial Street), there remains a hierarchy of street widths that supports a highly coded experience of place when walking in the downtown blocks.

The schematic sections shown use pedestrian-oriented design principles to achieve basic goals:
- Streetwall continuity
- Traffic calming
- Greening with street trees that have substantial canopies and are spaced at 25 foot intervals
- Maximized curbside parking
- Pedestrian islands of safety reduce crossing distance to less than 22 feet (6.5 m)
- Returning a water feature to Terminal Avenue

In combination, these concrete changes to street design will present a ‘new public realm’ in the downtown that will enhance the living, walking, and driving experience of place.

Extensive tree planting will play against the streetwalls of a new village urbanism. Filtered sunlight, oxygen, changing colors, habitat for bird species, and traffic calming count among the benefits of planting street trees in rows at 25 to 30 feet on center (6 - 9 m).
3.1 The Crescents

Nanaimo’s crescents are nothing short of magnificent, the scars inflicted during the last century’s modernism notwithstanding. The relationship of the crescents to the harbor is explicit in the early maps, before land fill altered the coastline.

While the round, or crescent form, was intended to shape both buildings and street, today Nanaimo’s most enigmatic plan features also represent a desert of asphalt, and the most inhospitable pedestrian areas in the townsite.

Fully built out, the experience of walking in the crescents will be the urban room. Achieving this will require a dual strategy. On the one hand, design guidelines should stress building out the streetwall on all lots in the crescents, as elsewhere in the downtown blocks. On the other, engineering analysis and design should deal more efficiently with the needs of both pedestrians and drivers. For example, a redundancy in capacity manifests as the blocks defined by Victoria Road and Nicol Street narrow approaching the Old Fire Hall, and pedestrians crossing here risk too much. A water feature at the foot of Victoria (see Bird’s Eye View on 4.5 Port Place) demonstrates the prominence of this site, yet it also suggests that traffic roundabouts can resolve some vehicular conflicts, possibly eliminating a signal or two.
3.1.1 Street End Vista

Street End Vistas, terminated or deflected by brick buildings of human scaled proportions, are among the most memorable features of Nanimo’s urbanism. Above, the square Eaton’s building on Victoria Crescent is replaced by a curving façade that follows the line of the crescent. As a result, the foot of Commercial Street is ‘closed’ with a terminated vista reinforcing the sense of place. Looking at this vista, one could be in only one place in this city, or continent.
3.2 Terminal Avenue

The opening of the Island Parkway on the outskirts of the downtown has substantially changed Terminal Avenue’s role. It’s time to address the design of the street.

The urban design plan envisions a calmed street with either a 22 foot canal in the center as a water feature, or a planted tree median of equal width, ennobling this blighted area in the downtown. Returning livability to its fronting building lots, beautification can attract a full build-out on both sides of the street. Introduce:

- Traffic calming and pedestrian oriented design from Comox Street to Victoria & Winfield Crescents
- Off-peak curb side parking
- A water feature commemorating the inlet previously here, serving as a gateway announcing the approach of downtown
- Streetwall continuity on both sides of a calmed street section
- Links across the ravine on all major streets connecting to the downtown blocks with either pedestrian or vehicular bridges, urban stairs, etc.
4.0 Urban Rooms and Village Squares

The urban design plan is a vision for the revitalization of Nanaimo's downtown blocks. The principle espoused is locating new development centered on new or existing village squares. In turn these urban rooms plug into the Front-Church-Commercial-Victoria-Winfield urban spine, reinforcing its role as backbone structuring the walking experience of place in Nanaimo's venerable downtown.

The redevelopment of Port Place Mall is also predicated on creating a linked series of new public open spaces, then making better connections to the urban spine and the rest of the surrounding urban fabric. The redevelopment aims to provide an urban shopping and entertainment experience modelled on Vancouver's Granville Island.

As revitalization builds out, walking downtown will become an experience of moving through a linked series of urban rooms—a 'string of pearls' setting up an unforgettable sense of place.
The Nanaimo Opera House, in the middle distance, left.

4.1 Dallas Square
Presented on the City website as the intersection of Church and Front Streets, this is Dallas Square: the heart of Nanaimo’s 1864 downtown plan.
4.1.1 Dallas Square

Envisioned as an Urban Room and reinstated as the ‘heart’ of Nanaimo’s downtown.
4.1.2 Dallas Square

Returning buildings to front the square will make this site the focus it was intended to be. We have forgotten the value of making “urban rooms”. The experience of walking into a square where buildings on fronting lots are erected on the property line or ‘streetwall’ is the experience of walking into a room with a ceiling open to the sky. It is urbanism’s most powerful element, generating ‘memory events’ aiding our orientation, and creating the sense of place.
4.2 Harbourfront Plaza

Roger Kemble MA RCA

Making sense of downtown’s assets, and the semiotics of the 1864 Deverill downtown Nanaimo plan, our proposal answers: CRESCENT.

This proposal respects the semiotics of the locale by orienting Port Theatre’s entrance to Harbourfront Plaza; then, integrating—preserving our heritage—The Port Theatre, Coast Bastion Hotel and contiguous facilities.
A pedestrian haven is enclosed by a masonry wrap arcade, with two stories of residential over.

4.3 Lubbock Square
Fitzwilliam at Prideaux Streets

Lubbock Square is one node in a complex of public urban spaces connected to the downtown commercial center by means of radiating pedestrian pathways.

Roger Kemble, MA RCA

St. Peter’s Catholic Church is in the background.
Gordon Street has always been a left over, problem area for the downtown. Pedestrian links to Commercial, and to Harbourfront Plaza, have never been substantial enough to support a vibrant street life. This proposal turns it into an urban room surrounded by walls—a place that becomes front door for a new hotel, community center, or residential terrace. The building bridges over Theatre Way to Harbourfront Plaza establishing a front door there.

The green roofs in the photo above belong to the Casino Nova Scotia Hotel, in Halifax Harbour. It is a 3.5 storey, 350 room, five star hotel built to respect the historic buildings that surround it showing an appropriate contextual response to a unique sitting condition.

Below: Gordon Street, the place every building turns a back to and ignores.
Nanaimo’s downtown shopping mall is shown redeveloped with a new axis centered on the Old Fire Hall tower, and a new circular fountain and vehicular round-about framed by Victoria Crescent, left, and Milford Crescent, right.
4.6 Pygmy Square

The Pygmy Pavilion (1931; now Fiesta Lanes) sported a sprung dance floor in this high quality industrial shed. The continuous ridge clerestory can be restored with full fenestration to achieve dramatic natural lighting effects inside. The F-sign is itself a Nanaimo landmark visible in places as far away as Terminal and Commercial, and on Front Street. Removing an existing building from the gable end of the pavilion, a village square is set up as parking lot, following the example of Granville Island. This urban room would enhance Chapel Street, itself one of downtown’s finest streets.
5.0 Transportation Loop

The analysis of the 1864 plan yields a ready-made concept for structuring transportation within the downtown blocks.

The loop shown opposite measures 7800 feet, 1.5 miles or 2.4 kilometers. More significantly, the entire area circumscribed by this loop is extremely well suited to walking. There is an opportunity to operate a one-way (free) trolley or bus loop, taking up a single lane on Comox-Front-Terminal, providing transportation services to the downtown blocks and transfers to other regional routes.

Transportation loop in Denver, Colorado, uses specially built low loading buses along a mile long pedestrian mall at 70 sec intervals. The service is free. However, ridership is 40,000 per day (Ron Simpson).
5.1 Terminal Avenue Park

The most visionary study at the Charrette considered the lack of park space downtown. It developed a city park on land now taken up by Terminal Avenue, then it surrounded it with terraced housing.
5.2 Linked Parks

The logical extension of the Waterfront Walkway is a linked system of parks north to Newcastle Island and west along the Millstone River.

The relationship of Newcastle Island to the downtown is remarkably similar to Regent’s Park in London, in size, distance from the center (1.5 miles), and location. Starting at the park, Regent Street functions as an urban spine in a manner reminiscent of Nanaimo’s urban spine (Front-Church-Commercial-Victoria-Winfield). Completed by 1830, Regent Street was an instant success, and would have been familiar—and famous—when the Nanaimo plan was being platted circa 1862-64.

A pedestrian bridge (or two) would enhance the ability of local residents to make use of Newcastle Island’s great urban amenity.

In 1913 an underwater cable was laid between Newcastle and Point Grey providing telephone service from the mainland. The Kanoo Pavilion opened in 1922 featuring a 30 x 60 foot dance floor. In 1931 the CPR purchased the island to build a pleasure resort (Luxton).
6. Financing Formula

The proven track record for funding revitalization projects is NOT with new taxes, which act as an impediment to the local economy.

The most widely recognized financial strategy for revitalization is Tax Increment Financing:

1. The municipal council passes a by-law specifying that all new taxes collected from new construction locating in the specially designated revitalization district will be set aside in a separate account.

2. After a few years, when the revenue flows into the account reach the level that they can service a 20 or 30 year municipal bond, the bond is issued.

3. A new by-law sunsets the special account at the same point in time that the bond is paid off.

Notice that by planning a tax increment for revitalization, step 2 provides the time and funding to complete the visioning process started here with the Downtown Nanaimo Charrette, October 15th, 2004, and this urban design plan presented to the public on November 4th, and to Council November 15th, 2004.
Appendix A: Trouble with Towers

- Blocked waterfront views
- Blocked street end vistas on Albert and Franklyn Streets
- On the street, the resulting urban quality lacks pedestrian scale and defensible space (see Newman) www.defensiblespace.com
- Adjacent overlooked lots are not valued
- ‘Superblocks’ build overpasses that spoil street-space
- ‘Superblocks’ generate additional car trips resulting in all-day congestion
- Towers cast long shadows
- Car loads are concentrated at garage entrances

Even when spaced far apart, towers come together to create a wall when viewed from different vantage points. In the photo above, the distance to the viewer of the various elements is as follows:

- St. Andrew’s Church steeple 500 feet
- Bastion Hotel 1800 ft.
- Cameron Island 2600 ft.
Appendix B: Misunderstanding the Plan

The Proposed Convention Center & Hotel Tower ‘Nanaimo Centre’ ignores the inherent human scale, and proportions of the irregular blocks, breaks the continuity of Commercial Street streetwall with a parkade entrance on Commercial, and bulldozes historic frontages. Downtown’s ‘problem’ is that its streets are superbly designed for walking. The charge that this complicates automobile flow is but another instance of getting the plan wrong. The walkability of the downtown blocks, properly planned, can be used to spread the parking load more widely by encouraging people to park and walk into the heart of Nanaimo.

Proposed: A Las Vegas Brand for Nanaimo

The urbanism that has damaged American downtowns the continent over is being proposed in Nanaimo. Towers in downtown Nanaimo’s waterfront fail the test of the San Francisco urban design principle, thus are simply ‘not appropriate’.
Appendix B.1: ‘Superblocks’

Super blocks are proposed for a convention center-hotel that violates the proportions of the extant, historic, human-scaled urbanism.

Podium height and length

The base or podium for the convention center—four storeys high and one-full-block long—violates the vertical and horizontal scale of Commercial Street. Thus, Nanaimo’s venerable ‘high street’ commercial district is threatened.

Vertical scale is given by the historic buildings. Retail buildings are 2 storeys with ground level storefront. At the Masonic Temple it is 3 stories. New construction should match this scale, then harmonize with traditional materials and styling.

Horizontal scale is given by the lot widths. Commercial has 895 linear feet of built frontage with an average width of 26.33 feet. This too should be respected. The proposed podium is 330 feet long, without breaks, except for a garage entrance, and has an average store front width of 55 feet, twice historic character.

A retail building typology consistently building out in the downtown blocks, counts among Nanaimo’s treasures. The monster opposite has nothing in common with this venerable local tradition.
Will the web site have points & pictures discussed here to forward & inform others?

Present findings directly to council.

Add more green space to the downtown area. Perhaps more public presence.

Would like to see ideas for fixing the VACUOUS dead beige space of the theatre-library-credit union plaza.

Need to create a mentality of urban pride, a common awareness of the beauty of urban spaces, textures, points and objects of interest. Need an urban-design group working immediately under the mayor, not submerged in some broader, faceless department (planning, engineering). Engineering works with the physical structure of the city – so perhaps a place/dept. where an urban design presence would do some good. Maybe make an urban designer “chief” of the dept. Don’t forget landmark sculptures (fountains).

Somewhere a second-or-first world war fighter plane raised up and featured.

Appendix C: What You Told Us

Public Comments Post-ed at the Downtown Nanaimo Charrette

Compiled by
Frances Christopherson

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Present findings directly to council.

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Somewhere a second-or-first world war fighter plane raised up and featured.
PRESENTLY ON THE TABLE.

* * *

“Totally, absolutely boring, ugly buildings” – I agree! Not people friendly – does not make the downtown an interesting place to be – except maybe large groups of cruise groups hurried through to buy expensive souvenirs. What I’d like to see is a vibrant arts community downtown & a marketplace like Granville Island where local people can have viable businesses. And Beauty is important! Why is our architecture in general so mechanical & not beautiful to look at? If people travel to Nanaimo & end up in an environment that looks like any other developed port destination what’s the point of coming here? I realize money is the basic issue & this company has the skills to handle this size project – but isn’t there some other group that has a track record of different more “people friendly” development. I live up the hill from the port & look out my window washing the dishes & there’s that high-rise in the middle of everything. I don’t like it!

* * *

Buildings fronting on Commercial St. should have 1920’s compatible appearance, many cities—Vancouver, Edmonton–have new developments that have vintage appearance. Conference centre must seat 500.

* * *

Carefree Commercial St., trees, benches, side-walk cafe’s, fountain, artistic features, people friendly, rather than cars & parking. A place to meet people & spend time.

* * *

Thank you for the opportunity to represent the people instead of the developer’s interests – they won’t be living here!

* * *

How about a new park system, a linear park system running continuously from Maffeo-Sutton Park up to Buttertubs? Presently there’s a disconnect at the Howard Johnson Hotel.

* * *

Discontinue commercial heavy truck traffic through the middle of the city (Dept. Bay ferry to Stuart Ave—Terminal). Wasn’t the point of Duke Point to eliminate this?!!

* * *

See above: Terminal is seen as the Main St. of Nanaimo, not Commercial St. Fix it!! And try to keep traffic controlled or refused on Commercial and related streets.

* * *

Transportation? What happens when we run out of oil and general energy in the next 25 years? Somebody says,” Hey, ten years!” Are we building a city for those times, in perhaps a transition from an automobile system to some new mode? How about the railroad system? Will it become more intensively used for people and goods movement? Will it connect village and town centres for 30 miles (radius) around Nanaimo? Will we need a new train station? Where would it be located? How about a greatly upgraded rail bed, overpasses, underpasses? Important—“Journey to Work”!

* * *

If we are interested in ice rinks and convention centre, why can’t we do it ourselves rather than a private-public scheme? What is the cost of the convention centre?

* * *

NO MORE HIGH RISES!

* * *

How about putting the conference centre where the foundry is? Forget about the 2 condos at that area?!! How about using some of our “bountiful amount of funds” to assist locals (or others) to develop our existing empty spaces above these storefronts into cozy residential units. Build various types of housing in the Old City Quarter area (there are many vacant lots or buildings) going up the slope. The conference centre doesn’t need to have condos on top. The conference centre will hold 900 delegates with 400 parking spaces. DUH!
If this goes through the conference centre should be built in a manner with sensitivity to the neighboring buildings.

* * *

Why do we need to tie in twin ice sheets to giving an out of town developer valuable land. The $30 M (minimum) investment would pay for a few ice rinks and some downtown “renovations” that would preserve the character.

* * *

Need to find a redevelopment solution that fits in with the character of the downtown rather that completely replacing it, i.e. a lower scale proposal.

* * *

We already have 6 shopping MALLS for a population under 80,000. Any wonder downtown is suffering? How many more blunders will City Hall support -- & hope to finance with our money –
before they decide to consult REAL people i.e. the ones who love this city & respect its past & those who built it years AGO??

How about those Green Buildings?!? Think of how much money is going to be spent on this development. In the long run these buildings save everyone large amounts of money, through everyday utilities, etc. We need education on this though, many people don’t like this idea because they think it will cost more money, but in the long run it doesn’t.

This development is a great idea, but I think we need to look at some of the good qualities that our downtown already has, and weigh them with the bad, before any final decisions are made. Some parts of downtown are really cool, they really attract ‘us’—a younger generation, in high school). Who are you catering to? It’s not like an advertisement for a certain demographic, people of all kinds live in Nanaimo.

While I can tolerate a conference centre downtown I do not think it will have a significant impact on revitalization of downtown. I would in no way vote for anything that put a high-rise @ the Civic Arena site. All that space should be green space & we should be actively pursuing purchase of more green space along the waterfront for future generations. We will not get it back! If you really want to revitalize downtown we need a dept. store. If this city can support 2 Thrifty’s, 4 Q-Foods, etc. Why only 1 Sears or Bay? I prefer nothing to the wrong thing.

‘NO’ TO THIS PACKAGE DEAL. BREAK IT DOWN INTO FUNDAMENTAL COMPONENTS & VOTE ON THEM SEPARATELY. A CONFERENCE CENTER MIGHT BE A GOOD IDEA BUT WITHOUT A COMPREHENSIVE PLAN FOR DOWNTOWN, WE SHOULDN’T PROCEED ON ANYTHING. P.S. KEEP THE HIGH RISES OFF THE WATERFRONT!

Yes. By all Means Go For It. BUT PLEASE KEEP COMMERCIAL ST. LOOKING ‘HERITAGE’ RATHER THAN ‘ALL GLASS & GLITTER’. WE’RE NOT IN HOLLYWOOD —THIS IS NANAIMO BC, CANADA

PLANS ARE ONLY PLANS IF YOU FOLLOW THEM. If you do not follow the plan anarchy prevails... disillusionment or development. Larry Iwaskow
NANAIMO

1. MALASPINA HOTEL IS A SAFETY HAZARD. BORROW MONEY TO APPROPRIATE IT AS A PUBLIC HAZARD, AND PROCEED WITH PLAN ‘A’: A CONFERENCE CENTRE WITH AN OCEAN VIEW.
2. HOLD WEEKLY EVENTS IN LIBRARY SQUARE TO ATTRACT CROWDS.
3. HOLD A DOWNTOWN TREASURE HUNT

The Ravine? PRESERVE THE ROCK FACES. INTRODUCE A LINEAR PARK STRIP WITH CREEK directly adjacent to the rocky outcropping. Mouth of Millstone River needs rehabilitation – Rework the estuary scene back past Howard Johnson Hotel, with natural walkways through to Bowen Park. Create some small islands.

Landscaping round the truck terminal by Front St. A garden on the corner of Front and Terminal by the old gas station. Pedestrian friendly lights between Commercial St. and Victoria Crescent and across to China steps. Coordinated light, do away with the Pedestrian activated mechanism. This would help make Victoria Crescent which is an interesting part of town part of City Centre. Acknowledge that the “Old Quarter” is not really the old town – it’s only a name someone thought up. Get the industry out of the South End. Give the South End access to the water.

NOTE: This Diagram is Under the Assumption the NNC Project Gets Approval or Better Yet Re-Negotiated with All Nanaimoites. If the NNC Goes on the Old Arena Site Perhaps the Adjoining Hotel Could be Built a Lot Lower and Avoiding the Tower (Hi-Rise) Approach. This of Course Would Take up a Bit More Land at that site. All the Retail and Residential on Commercial St. Would Be New, As Well As New Retail Where Bus Loop is. The Courtyard (Rooftop) Would be for Condo Residents only. The Old Bank of Montreal + Parking Lot Also an Alternate Site for Museum Leaving More Room at Arena for Centre & Hotel. [DIAGRAM] Note: Condo Apts. On Commercial St. Would Be of Varying Heights and Density. These Structures Are Set Up And Behind the Retail Shops. Peder Long, PederVrodkonLo ng@yahoo.ca

Friends of Plan Nanaimo

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Downtown Nanaimo Charrette: Full build out view
Commissioned by Friends of Plan Nanaimo from Lewis N. Villegas, B.Arch. November 4, 2004