

# LIVING DENSITY

**Exhibition & Forum / May 9 - 22, 2009 / Grace Gallery  
Organized by Architecture For Humanity Vancouver**

Joaquin Karakas / Peter Cardew / Patrick Foong Chan / Bryn Davidson / Steve di Pasquale / Angelique Pilon / Halima Qureshi / Lila Cheimak / MyHomeYourHome / Caine Heintzman / Josh Doherty / Michael Barber / Theresa Fresco / Neal LaMontagne / Katherine Isaac / Robert Chester / Maged Senbel

If innovations were the result of chanced encounters, can the densification of our urban fabric be a catalyst for new levels of cultural understanding and development? As urban centres around the world continue to experience population growth, the social and design challenges they present could be great sources of opportunities in reinventing our environment. Responsible design approaches require our collective imagination.

Architecture for Humanity Vancouver is seeking architectural ideas and concept that is beneficial to our immediate future. But the need for sustainable density is not at all unique to Vancouver: With this exhibition-forum-competition launch, it is the beginning of our open-ended report on urban and sustainable density. It is our goal to collaborate with an international body of practitioners, policy makers, scholars, and users to bring forth innovations, ideas, and lessons that may benefit all of us. We welcome and encourage your suggestions and participation.

LivingDensity Exhibition & Forum grew out of a response to the City of Vancouver's EcoDensity Charter<sup>1</sup>. Two things are explored at this event: First, LivingDensity examines the positive transformative qualities of design-led approaches to urban densification. Second, LivingDensity examines the interdisciplinary nature of urban densification. Densification is not just an architect or planner's concern; it involves the necessary interlinking of architecture, planning and disciplines like industrial design, interior design and communication design.

## Designing as Questioning

The term 'design-led' is sometimes misinterpreted as being obsessed with how things look, hence commodification. This is partly because the term 'design' is usually associated with an immutable product, building or graphic. Nonetheless, the word 'design' also indicates action. 'Design' derives from the Latin designare, which means to give something a sign or meaning. However, a product, building or graphic's meaning is not fixed but changes with the context. The designing of or the giving of meaning to a city is likewise context-driven and changeable throughout short- and long-term history. Design-led approaches to city- and place-making amidst densification indicate a process of questioning current values and forms more than the fixing of values and forms.

From the perspective of designare, the works exhibited can be read not as what Vancouver should look like. Rather, the works inspire how our city's spatiality and identity can be differently imagined. For example, the laneway houses presented by urban designer Joaquin Karakas and the consolidated three-storey walk-ups by architecture students Steve di Pasquale and Angelique Pilon do not insist on a definitive notion of home. These new typologies and morphologies question what is 'home' and how can we may imagine and produce 'home' otherwise. How these three-storey walk-ups and laneway houses may be built and, more importantly, inhabited by their users produce unique identities and spaces that cannot be predetermined.

Architecture and urban design can be treated as the production of physical spaces that prompt the act of questioning. Concepts and questions can be derived from the material realm of actions and built forms; they do not always precede this realm via a Cartesian hierarchy of mind and matter. In other words, place and community can be made and remade through actions and new built forms; place and community rarely pre-exist actions and built forms.

This act of questioning and rebuilding new senses of place, community and subjectivity must not be conceived as just the concern of designers. Design-led does not mean designer-centric. Urban theorists David Bell and Mark Jayne noted constant dialogues with stakeholders must be maintained to ensure political enthusiasm for a design-led agenda. For instance, visioning events involving local design practitioners, policy makers and neighbourhood representatives can be held to understand existing values, how these values may be collaboratively rethought<sup>2</sup>. Visioning is co-visioning. It is neither about designers hard-selling their designs to the

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neighbourhood nor a matter of the clients (neighbours) being always right. Design theorists Elizabeth Sanders and Pieter Jan Stappers aptly sum up this co-creative process:

*In co-design... the roles get mixed up: the person [a neighbourhood representative or similar] who will eventually be served through the design process is given the position of 'expert of his/her experience', and plays a large role in knowledge development, idea generation and concept development. In generating insights, the researcher [designer] supports the 'expert of his/her experience' by providing tools for ideation and expression. The [new] expert and the researcher collaborate on the tools for ideation.*<sup>3</sup>

Design-led approaches to urban densification and the necessary tools to do it can be co-created. Questions about what home, community and self means amidst densification can be co-asked. Emily Carr University's MyHomeYourHome Group's open-to-public charrettes (conducted at the gallery from 11th to 19th May) on designing small living spaces express these co-creating and co-asking processes.

## Interlinked Scales

The three scales of urban planning, architecture and interior/industrial design are not mutually exclusive. Demonstration is the best way to speak of this relation. For example, Joaquin Karakas' suggestion that the inhabitation of laneways 'creates a more positive association of the back alley' can only be possible if the architectural interior is well designed. The design of massing and property lot layouts done on an urban planning scale must go hand-in-hand with interior design. Additionally, Karakas also suggested that exposing the public to laneway houses precedents may warm the public to laneway and infill housing and hence increase their uptake. Here, design-led events, such as an exhibition of precedents, create societal demand. When there is demand, planning policies and by-laws may change correspondingly. Here, policies are led by public will and desire rather than just the other way round.

Likewise, architecture students Lila Cheimak and Halima Qureshi's use of an urban farm to bring activity from the front street to the laneway is another re-imagining of public space. They suggested, 'back alleys are not only under used spaces but also waste of un-used land, considering how expensive land is in the West End. By incorporating back alleys into the existing West End grid, it will create a more animated and colourful fabric. The back alleys will generate new hubs.' Moreover, programmatically the urban farm can become a meeting point, sort of informal public square. In Karakas' and Cheimak and Qureshi's work, the scales of architecture, community and physical planning and the individual are interlinked.

Creating a sense of community and home can also be achieved through industrial/interior design. Caine Heintzman and Joshua Doherty's transformable table and eating-ware demonstrate smaller living spaces do not equate a lower living standard. A wellness of being produced through interior and industrial design may translate to a feeling of homeliness. This sense of home may in turn translate to feeling more grounded within one's neighbourhood and community. Additionally, the interior layout of a laneway house may inspire better massing design and layouts of principle dwellings and their associated infills. Here, the industrial/interior design scale produces changes that can be considered of planning scale.

LivingDensity explores how densification can be engaged with at these interlinked scales. To be living density is to experience density on all scales.

Patrick Foong Chan & Linus Lam

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1 [www.vancouver-ecodensity.ca](http://www.vancouver-ecodensity.ca) (accessed: 30th April 2009)

2 David Bell & Mark Jayne, "Design-led' Urban Regeneration: a Critical Perspective' in *Local Economy* (Vol. 18, No.2, May 2003, 121-134), 129.

3 Elizabeth Sanders and Pieter Jan Stappers, *Co-Creation and the New Landscape of Design*, [http://make-tools.com/pdfs/CoCreation\\_Sanders\\_Stappers\\_08\\_preprint.pdf](http://make-tools.com/pdfs/CoCreation_Sanders_Stappers_08_preprint.pdf) (accessed: 20th March 2009)

## About Us

Architecture For Humanity Vancouver, local chapter of the international body, is a registered not-for-profit society promoting architectural and design solutions to local, social and environmental issues. We strive to create opportunities for Vancouver architects, designers, and artists to improve quality of living through design, and to help communities in need. We believe innovative, sustainable and collaborative design can make a difference. Reflecting the multi-disciplinary nature of the practice, our volunteers are consisted of Architects, Planners, Interior Designers, Engineers, Artists, Industrial designers, Graphic designers, Educators, Community Activists, and Students.

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