

Beyond motordom

Gordon Price, Canadian urban planner and a former politician, recently visited New Zealand to offer a few observations on Motordom, density and city growth.

Words by **Kent Lundberg**

Traditionally, urban innovation was based along trading routes and other slower methods of communication. It's no wonder that New Zealand shares similar physical traits as its major trading partners, and why places like San Francisco with its 'Victorians' look very similar to our villas. Today, urban innovation moves at a lightning pace abetted by the internet and its various social networks. Even though the internet is highly diffusing, it seems as if urban global innovation and influence is still very 'spiky', coming from a handful of places.

One of the most influential cities over the last 20 years has been Vancouver. And because it shares some of the same attributes of Auckland and is now conveniently accessible by direct overnight flights, makes it a rich resource for how Auckland may grow in the future.

Gordon Price is one of a number of urbanist evangelists travelling the world and telling his story of Vancouver. Gordon was a city councillor in Vancouver during a highly transformative period in the mid 90s. He currently serves as Director of the City Program at Simon Fraser University and much of his travel and work is based in the Pacific region from Los Angeles and Portland to Brisbane and Perth. When Gordon lands in a city like Auckland which he has done increasingly over the last few years, he comfortably (and generously) joins the local tribe of urbanists in settings that include meeting rooms, walking tours and local pubs.

On this occasion Gordon graciously agreed to speak at the Auckland Conversations forum on a subject he called Lessons from Vancouver: Moving Beyond Motordom. He framed the overall conversation on the varying rates of change cities undergo, starting with status quo, moving to incremental, then seismic, and finally apocalyptic. Cities and communities, he argues, are undergoing various levels of change and there is a requirement for them to understand the difference between them. He used examples of financial meltdowns to natural disasters to emphasise that in many ways are planning systems are not designed for seismic change, let alone with apocalyptic change such as global warming.

Central to the conversation was the role of cities and urban design in the face of resource scarcity, in particular with oil. The suburban experiment in Australia, Canada, and especially latecomer New Zealand, has been predicated on the assumption of cheap and secure energy supplies. Importantly, Vancouver unlike virtually every other new world city did not

buy into the world of motordom so wholeheartedly. Price described the monumental decision Vancouver made in the early 70s to reject the urban motorway model with its associated residential dispersement. This one decision forced the city to take urban densification seriously as a growth mechanism. The role of density and transport has enabled the city to grow up and not so much out.

The transformation of downtown Vancouver over the subsequent decades has been astonishing, as Price demonstrated with time-lapse photos. Between 1990 and 2011, through the implementation of the city's growth strategy called "living first" strategy, the number of people living downtown increased from 40,000 to 100,000. The change was not without disruptions and many lessons were learned, especially the value and role of community engagement and planning as facilitators of change. In regards to encouraging density, Price recommended to Auckland that it make incremental changes in places with high levels of stasis and focus seismic change on brownfield sites such as redundant railyards and surface parking lots.

Moving away from auto-dependency – "motordom", or auto-dependency, as he calls it – also pays big dividends. Price showed many examples of streets and parts of the city which were being decommissioned from motordom and returned to urban amenities such as public space and natural environs. Clearly passionate about this, he implored cities to "cash-in" in the post-motordom era, the land is free, and ultimately a city's biggest opportunity.

While much of our urban information today can be accessed via the internet and YouTube and TED talks, it's interesting how invaluable these public events are for local leaders and city lovers. Price's talk was most likely reinvigorating for professionals at the coal face, who often only see very slight change. Let's hope that one or two of Price's ideas stick. Perhaps the next time Gordon visits, he'll be able to take what he observes here back to Vancouver. **1**

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Gordon Price, conscientious traveller. As Price notes on his blog – pricetags.wordpress.com – he decided to take the money he would have spent on carbon offsets for his trip to New Zealand, double it, and donate the sum to a Kiwi who could come up with "an idea to use the modest expenditure to promote an incremental change that could make a difference". Enter stage left Richard Reid. The landscape architect has lately been working on an alternative design proposal to the flyover project preferred by the NZTA at the Basin Reserve precinct, Wellington. Reid's proposal has gained traction (as reported here: bit.ly/SNHXcZ) and we look forward to seeing the plans which would, to paraphrase Reid, avoid the need for a 380m-long flyover, save \$100 million dollars and protect the historic urban structure of the city and important public space features along the route. As you may have guessed, Price's carbon money has gone to Reid, who will be using the money to pay for the printing and binding of colour drawings to illustrate his design.