

## URBAN DESIGN

## Public art adds to a neighbourhood's palette

As Vancouver has found, open-air sculptures can bring an identity and other benefits to a community, even if the contribution is hard to financially measure

**GUY DIXON >**

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The Vancouver West End Business Improvement Area's new slogan is 'three great streets, one amazing neighbourhood,' a clear tie-in to the A-maze-ing Laughter sculptures in Morton Park.

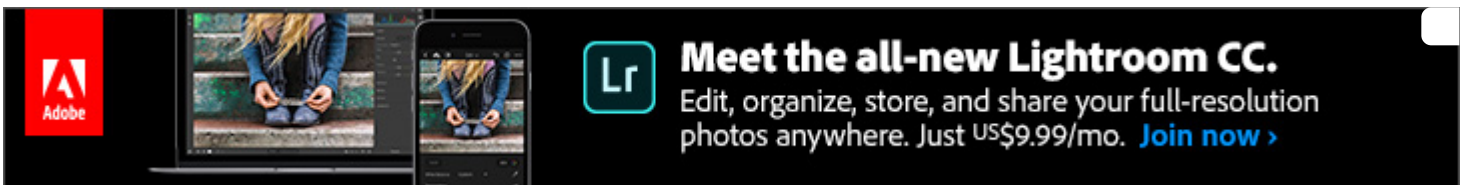
RAFAL GERSZAK/THE GLOBE AND MAIL


Happiness doesn't have a price, when it comes to public art and commercial real estate.

that the sculpture gives neighbourhood locals: All are immeasurable.

Yet, to keep the work by Chinese artist Yue Minjun on the corner of Davie and Denman streets, at *the spot* in Vancouver's West End, across the street from English Bay Beach, did require roughly \$1.5-million from Lululemon founder Chip Wilson and his wife, Shannon, to make the statue permanent in 2012.

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That gift helped to set a precedent. The work was originally mounted by the 2009-11 Vancouver Biennale, a public art exhibition, and quickly became a huge hit, despite the inevitable initial dismissals from neighbours when it was installed. It's such a fixture now that it's hard to remember the original look of Morton Park, the little parkette on which the statue stands, historically a nondescript wedge of mowed grass and flower arrangements, a fusty adornment to the beach.

So, the work was primarily a transaction between the Biennale, the Wilsons and the Vancouver Park Board, with less involvement from the city. But it further propelled the City of Vancouver's emphasis on the importance of public art throughout the city, including such draws as *The Birds*, the equally popular, gigantic pair of sparrows by Vancouver artist Myfanwy MacLeod in the city's Olympic Village.

What was once a city of neon, then a city of nostalgic ornaments (the Woodward's "W," the Stanley Park's *Girl in a Wetsuit*), is now a city of world-worthy contemporary public art (including also the giant painted silos at Ocean Concrete on Granville Island, Douglas Coupland's *Digital Orca*).


There are various plans in which works are commissioned by the city, including stipulations that developers of rezoned sites larger than 100,000 square feet must contribute to public art projects.

is, approved by the city.

Or there's Option B. Developers can alternatively pay 80 per cent of the required art budget to the city, which is then used by the Signature Projects Fund for major art works commissioned by the city on prominent sites. All is outlined on the city's website. Other cities have this too, such as Toronto's Percent for Public Art Program.

The question remains, how does the immeasurable joy of great public art fit into these real-estate cost calculations?

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"I don't know if we've really put our finger on anything more technical, anything more ROI [return on investment]," says Stephen Regan, executive director of the West End Business Improvement Area.

Digital Orca, created by Douglas Coupland, is among the other statement pieces in Vancouver's public art scene. A city levy on developers to pay for art ensures more works will get funded and created.

DARRYL DYCK/THE CANADIAN PRESS

The board of the BIA had been very supportive of making *A-maze-ing Laughter* permanent. It also fit into the rebranding that the association was undertaking for the West End, eventually coming up with the slogan "three great streets, one amazing neighbourhood." The three main commercial streets are Davie, Denman and Robson.

"We chose 'amazing' on purpose, as an adjective that fit the neighbourhood," Mr. Regan says. It's not every day that a work of art has such influence.

He indicates that it's impossible to say how many tourists the work attracts, or how much it persuades them to linger long enough to buy a coffee nearby, or stop for a sushi lunch along Denman, or how much the statue specifically has increased business sales or commercial rents. What's important is to think of it as part of the neighbourhood mix.

"There's a mix, somewhat like a portfolio that the board of directors have tried to put together at the West End BIA. There's a promotional element, but there's also what we call a revitalization. That's your place-making and advocacy basket.

"Is it clean? Is it safe? What about taxes? What about parking? What about other transportation? And what is in the public realm? Is the public art nice? Do you want public art?" Mr. Regan says.

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And the mix isn't not only about appearances, but about the mix of businesses and attractions to the neighbourhood. About a third of the businesses on Denman are restaurants, which can be a problem with fewer retail stores opening up and vacancy rates hovering around 10 per cent.

"It is a complicated formula. There are lots of little parts. Certain businesses are a part of it, but also businesses acumen. Do you have the right model? Do you really understand the

Public art, while it doesn't contribute to the balance sheet, is inevitably part of the flavour of the neighbourhood, anchoring it, giving it prominence.

Surprisingly though, there isn't a great deal of competition among neighbourhoods for these kinds of works, says Eric Fredericksen, head of public art for the office of cultural services for the City of Vancouver. "Not as much as you might expect. There are definitely conversations that we have with certain neighbourhoods, where they feel like they're not getting enough [public art]. That definitely happens."

He adds, "There is a danger, at least with the City program, that public art funding typically follows where new development is happening. A neighbourhood without a lot of development, whether it's a neighbourhood that's too rich or too poor, might not see as much public art as a neighbourhood that's turning over really quickly, like Mount Pleasant."

And finally there are the developers who have their own way of valuing public art, as a leverage with the city, in terms of winning approval for their projects. "We've had many developers come to us. All the major names in Vancouver, at some point, have asked if we could participate with them, and can we help them in some of their choices," says Barrie Mowatt, president and founder of the Vancouver Biennale.

But mostly, he added, are Vancouverites themselves, who have come to value public art as their own. "People have taken ownership of works that haven't even become permanent yet," Mr. Mowatt says. And that adds value which many feel is immeasurable.

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