



## Asserting historical “distinctiveness” in industrial waterfront transformation



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### ABSTRACT

As formerly industrial urban waterfronts are redeveloped worldwide, a common claim of these projects is that they preserve the historical distinctiveness of their sites. This essay presents an industrial waterfront redevelopment in a suburban context, namely the Queensborough neighborhood of New Westminster, British Columbia. We note that Queensborough, past and present, is presented as “distinctive,” though with different connotations for different time periods. In the past, Queensborough’s distinctiveness was a neutral term meant to mask perceived problems. Currently, distinctiveness is a positive term meant to signal a desirable address. Ironically, the historical characteristics that gave the neighborhood its unique flavor have been largely erased with the demolition of the industrial buildings and sites. The rapid redevelopment of the industrial waterfront for residences has led to the adoption of building styles and forms similar to those found in widely dispersed places.

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*distinctive (adjective): 1) having a quality or characteristic that makes a person or thing different from others, different in a way that is easy to notice; 2) appealing or interesting because of an unusual quality or characteristic.*

[–Merriam-Webster.com]

### Introduction

Increasingly over the past three decades cities have found urban development potential in formerly industrial waterfront areas. Although redevelopments are found worldwide, the current phase of urban reorganization can be traced primarily to North American and European cities. The first approaches to waterfront redevelopment taken in places such as Boston, Baltimore, Seattle, San Francisco and London were tied to city-building agendas (Bruttomesso, 2004; Florio & Brownill, 2000; Sieber, 1991: 42; Fainstein, 2005: 16; Gospodini, 2006; Jones, 2007: 145; Smith & Ferrari, 2012: 18–19). These redeveloped waterfronts are highly visible urban spaces, which often make a significant contribution to the character and expression of the entire city (Marshall, 2001: 54; Zukin, 2010).

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Subsequent approaches to waterfront redevelopment have moved beyond festival marketplaces and mega-projects located in core urban areas (Shaw, 2001). Galland and Hansen argue that waterfront redevelopment projects are today pursued by diverse actors each employing “specific governance processes qualified by a range of embedded cultural values” (2012: 220). This hybrid approach to waterfront planning is associated with another trend highlighting the importance of waterfronts in localized place-making. That is, they are frequently heralded as places with unique and distinctive histories which redevelopment has preserved. In this paper we examine how developers, city planners and other officials employ the term distinctive in ways that may elide the two related, but different, meanings of the term.

On the one hand, “distinctiveness” has a neutral connotation when it is purely used to signal local history. But the term is also employed to signal positive associations or marks of distinction (Bourdieu, 1984). This is a common practice for waterfront redevelopments worldwide (City of Oslo, 2008; New York City, 2011: 4, 28; City of Helsinki, 2010). The language of distinctiveness is reproduced in government planning documents as well as in developers’ marketing materials to evoke romanticized or heroic histories of sites (Greenberg, 2000; Paasi, 2013). Nonetheless, what is actually meant by the term distinctiveness, the history that it references, and indeed, how much historical distinctiveness is enough, appear to be arbitrary. Rather “distinctiveness” seems to

have become an easy slogan adopted by so many actors for so many different purposes that it does not mean much in practice. Nevertheless, the actual historical practices and activities that render a site distinctive or unique do add to the built environment. Past practices also persist in cultural landscapes and local identities, contributing to the sense of place and encouraging a more inclusive perspective on the city (De Cillia, Reisigl, & Wodak, 1999: 153, 154; Nagpal & Sinha, 2009: 505; Paasi, 2013: 1208).

In this essay we examine the claims of historical distinctiveness in the redevelopment of a formerly industrial suburban waterfront. Existing research on waterfront redevelopments have mainly focused on former seaports in core urban areas. The waterfront we examine has been transformed from marine-oriented industrial manufacturing and agricultural to mid-range residential. We have chosen a suburban waterfront in the Vancouver, British Columbia metropolitan region, the neighborhood of Queensborough in the City of New Westminster, as there has been little scholarly attention to redevelopment of suburban industrial waterfronts into residential areas. Additionally, few scholars have considered how these projects have drawn on and informed knowledge about actual historical activities and built forms in the assertions of history.

The Queensborough neighborhood is located at the northeast tip of Lulu Island in the Fraser River delta. It is physically separated from the core of New Westminster by the north arm of the river. It is socially separated as well, long understood to be low income and ethnically mixed (that is, before such diversity became fashionable). Residential structures were located in close proximity to heavy industrial sites and agricultural land. Longtime residents invoke a sense of separation from the rest of the city when they describe crossing the Queensborough Bridge as “going to New Westminster” (see Fig. 1). An urban renewal study for the City of New Westminster conducted in the 1960s presented Queensborough as facing especially difficult planning challenges. In particular, the building stock was seen as a problem when judged against the idealized and uniform suburbia espoused at the time (New Westminster, 1965, 1966a, 1966b; Vancouver Sun, 1966). We trace the ways in which this actual difference is deployed as distinctiveness in the ongoing redevelopment of the neighborhood’s riverfront.

## Evidence and approach

The evidence presented here is part of a larger study examining the history of work on the New Westminster waterfront. Over the last three decades, the waterfront in New Westminster has become largely deindustrialized and redeveloped with housing, commerce, linear parks and other public spaces. The waterfront portion of Queensborough has been one of the most thoroughly reconfigured parts of the city. We reviewed planning documents and development proposals, sought out historic photographs, maps and other documents, and conducted numerous open-ended interviews. Of these, fourteen interviews were specific to Queensborough, conducted with longtime residents, city officials, a local historian, and a representative of the major real estate developer.

Buildings are never alone – they are affected by each other and the surrounding environment. Buildings are part of the entirety of the larger urban landscape, and decisions to demolish, add, restore, or adapt structures all contribute to an area’s character. Modifications can, over time, affect the visual character of a place and further differentiate or homogenize an area (Berman, 2006: 1; Antrop, 2005: 32). As part of our analysis, informed by the iconographical framework of Panofsky (1972), we have tried to trace the changes in the built form, the relationship to the river, and in the human activities that contribute to the past and present sense of Queensborough as a distinctive place. The iconographic framework is an appropriate tool for analyzing waterfront redevelopment plans as well as for analyzing physical waterfronts because it allows us to consider both the material evidence of human activities and their symbolic purposes and significance (see Raivo, 1996). Through interpretation of the current built environment, it is possible to see what planners and redevelopers have chosen from the past to represent as the distinctive history of the area.

Decisions to demolish or preserve historic structures reflect the social value actors attach to particular time periods, uses, or builders. An analysis of the architectural layers within the built environment may reveal which historical periods matter, and to whom. Whether or not buildings are valued may also be related to the functions they previously served. Van Dijk and Pinheiro (2003: 90) observe a tendency to avoid venerating industrial heritage. As Queensborough has deindustrialized there has been no



Fig. 1. New Westminster and Queensborough (bottom left corner), 1892 (Canada, 1892).

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