

THE LOCAL DEMOCRACY PROJECT – WHITE PAPER TWO

Civic Government, Corporate, Consultative or Participatory?

Introduction:

In 1974, Dr. David Ley curated a seminal volume titled "Community Participation and the Spatial Order of the City," which provided a comprehensive examination of the emergence and evolution of neighborhood associations in North American cities during the transformative decades of the 1960s and 1970s. Against the backdrop of the civil rights movement, the Vietnam War, and local activism, Vancouver witnessed a surge in community mobilization, as citizens organized to challenge corporate interests and advocate for greater autonomy over neighborhood development.

One of the notable essays in Ley's compilation, penned by Drs. Walter and David Hardwick, critically analyzed the transition in civic governance from a corporate to a consultative to a participatory model. They concluded that, while full participation could lead to inefficiencies and delays in decision-making, a consultative approach might offer a more balanced and democratic alternative, and in any case more responsive to the electorate than a corporate model was.

Vancouver's trajectory reflected this shifting paradigm. By 1974, the City had embarked on a journey towards a consultative model, spurred by the election of a TEAM majority council in 1972. Despite subsequent administrations attempting to fully reinstate the previous participatory Ward System, the city remained entrenched in a governance framework that prioritized centralized decision-making.

However, by 2024, new widespread transformations have occurred across North American cities, with a returning swing back towards corporate models of governance. Consultative and participatory processes are increasingly accused of being a root cause of pressing urban challenges such as housing affordability (Robinson; Schragger 125) and have subsequently become marginalized by multiple cities across the continent (Schragger 169, 195-196). This shift prompts critical reflection informed by economic and historical evidence on the erosion of local democracy and its implications.

Two main forces on the global scale have worked towards the revival of the corporate model in local governance. Investment capital has become increasingly mobile in the age of globalization, allowing for transnational financial flows into urban land, untethering it from its use value as housing by an engaged and active citizenry (Ley 298-299). The spread of neoliberalism has moved in lockstep with this trend, justifying the primacy of growth, the rule of the market, and privatization of public property. The consequence being that "in a political economy driven by the imperative of economic growth, the community's interest in economic stability or the individual's interest in remaining in place is subsumed by the national interest in macro-economic efficiency" (Schragger 206).

After 40 years of this political economy influencing North American cities, its inability to provide affordable housing increasingly demands sharp examination, for the paradigm shifts it has initiated in planning and local governance have been radical.

Part 1 - Corporate Model:

The incorporation of Vancouver in 1886 marked the establishment of a governance structure heavily influenced by entrepreneurial interests. Mayors and aldermen drawn from business circles saw themselves as stewards of economic growth, advocating for policies that favored land development and enterprise expansion. This model of city administration was commonplace in North American frontiers around the turn of the 20th century, characterized by aggressive boosterism, speculation, and growth promotion. The motto of this club of boosters aptly describes this doctrine: "In 1910 Vancouver then, will have 100,000 men."

The adoption of an at-large system in 1936 then aimed to depoliticize city governance, replacing ward-based representation with a centralized model that emphasized professionalism and efficiency. Ward abolition, pushed forward by the provincial government, fundamentally reversed the former view and practice that groups based around geography should have special influence in citizen participation. Rather, a Burkian view of governance prevailed: individual politicians should follow their own 'conscience,' developing a close relationship with the Board of Trade instead of constituents (Tennant 8). The at-large system paved the way for landslide majorities on the council, led by a cohesive minority of dedicated voters on the city's West Side. In 1936, Vancouver's CCF chapter favoured ward abolition (Tennant 5) in the spirit of the American progressive era's municipal reform movement (Koop & Kraemer 434), which associated wards with widespread bossism and machine politics in city government. But, the business class also favoured the at-large system, because its electoral structure "[kept] the socialists out of city hall." (Tennant 7). Vancouver was unique in its decision to abolish wards in the Canadian context; why it was distinctive enough to transition to an at-large system remains debatable, but its consequence over the next 35 years was that commerce was embedded as the essential civic activity (Tennant 8-9).

The post-World War II era witnessed a concerted focus on infrastructure development, mirroring the material aspirations of the city's residents. The Council/manager system, inspired by corporate management principles, sought to insulate decision-making from partisan politics, entrusting policy initiation to elected officials while delegating administrative functions to professional civil servants. This arrangement, while efficient in promoting economic growth and urban development, also laid the groundwork for bureaucratic inertia and further diminished citizen engagement.

Part 2 - Consultative Model:

By the mid-1960s, public dissatisfaction with the corporate model's rigidity and insularity catalyzed the emergence of alternative governance paradigms. Political organizations advocating for greater citizen involvement and neighborhood empowerment gained traction,

mirroring civil rights movements across the rest of the continent. They challenged the status quo and called for a more consultative approach to decision-making. Under the leadership of figures like Ray Spaxman, Vancouver embraced a consultative model that prioritized community engagement in planning and development processes.

The consultative model represented a significant departure from the top-down, corporate-style governance of previous decades. Emphasizing principles of inclusivity and transparency, city officials sought to involve residents in shaping the future of their neighborhoods through participatory planning initiatives and public consultations. Despite facing challenges from entrenched interests and economic pressures, proponents of the consultative model made notable strides in promoting livability and community cohesion.

However, the consultative model was not without its limitations. Economic shifts, regime changes, and external pressures often undermined its effectiveness, leading to a resurgence of corporate governance priorities. The 2008 election of Vision Vancouver marked a significant pivot back towards a corporate model, as the city prioritized revenue generation through property development and economic growth over community engagement and participatory decision-making.

Part 3 - Participatory Model:

Efforts to establish a more participatory form of democracy, where citizens have a direct say in decision-making processes, have faced significant challenges in Vancouver. Advocates of a participatory model, inspired by movements for social justice and grassroots empowerment, have called for the reinstatement of ward-based representation and the creation of citizen advisory groups to hold elected officials accountable.

Despite these efforts, the return to a participatory model has remained elusive. The six plebiscites and referendums on the subject have failed to win the super majority demanded and a lack of widespread voter engagement. Nevertheless, recent threats to abolish the Vancouver Park Board have reignited calls for more direct democracy, underscoring the need for greater citizen involvement in governance processes.

Conclusion:

In conclusion, Vancouver's journey from corporate to participatory governance models offers valuable insights into the complexities of urban governance and community engagement. Significant challenges remain in reconciling competing scaled interests and ensuring meaningful citizen participation.

As we look towards the future, it is imperative that we continue to explore innovative strategies for reinforcing local democracy and empowering communities to shape their own destinies. Whether through the establishment of citizen advisory groups, the reinstatement of ward-based representation, or the adoption of digital technologies to facilitate greater public engagement,

there is much work to be done in building more responsive and accountable governance structures in our cities. By embracing the principles of inclusivity, transparency, and collaboration, we can work towards creating cities that are truly of, by, and for the people.

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