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Landscapes in Time – Granville Island



"Draft Map of the Vancouver area before the Whiteman came" – 1932; Image courtesy of the Vancouver Archives

Snaug was more than a sandbar - more than a landscape of gathered silt and sand. Snaug was a place for the gathering of Nations and the gathering of food; a place for ceremony, reverence and reciprocity for Nature. Through Snaug's appropriation, it became a place for the gathering of industrialists and industrial materials for their transformation to goods and services, until it was transmuted into what is today: Granville Island.

This is a study of three distinct landscapes, not separated through distance but temporally and a study of the duplicity of a landscape's meaning as a function of the culture that exerts claim. Landscapes are a reflection of our values: what we create, where we choose to live, whether we protect it, restore it or exploit it - land is something we imbue with intent, meaning and value. Examining how culture interacts with land is a means to derive insight into the beliefs and values that bind that culture.

Just as Granville Island was once Snaug, Vancouver was once Xwayxway ("whoi whoi"). Home to the Musqueam, Squamish, and Tsleil-Waututh (MST) peoples, it was one of the most densely populated Indigenous regions in the world and, as testament to this landscape's generosity, the only of those regions to subsist without agriculture (Matthews, 149). While Snaug itself was on Musqueam land, the Southern shore of False Creek, the Squamish were the only peoples to establish a permanent settlement there upon invitation from the 13 remaining Tsleil-Waututh, in response to the epidemic that nearly erased them (Tsleil-Waututh Nation).



Khatsahlano, Swanamia and their child. Snauq in the background – 1910; Image courtesy of the Musqueam Archives

The MST peoples revered the tidal flats as a gift. The Tsleil-Waututh would say that “when the tide was out, the table was set” (Thomas). The shore was rich with wild cabbage, mushroom, camas, and berries; while the tidal floor provided kelp, oyster, clam and mussel; the creeks that supplied False Creek, would be seasonally abundant in salmon (Maracle, 16). The harvest was so plentiful the landscape was shared, and frequently hosted multinational ceremony.

After many millennia of dense habitation, Snauq remained pristine. MST peoples understood the concept of the honourable harvest: to take only what is offered, never the first, never the last and always to give something in return (Kimmerer, 175-205). This is a central tenet to Indigenous land relations. Ceremonies were and still are held in the honour of understanding their place in the cycle of life and in honour of Xwayxway and Snauq’s generosity.

The MST peoples did not define land ownership the way we do in the modern era. For the neighbouring coastal communities, access to claimed space was afforded through the demonstration of respect towards the land (Vancouver), these shared attitudes were emblematic of the cultural ethea that afforded those millennia. Snauq didn’t survive, however, and in stark contrast with the dominant culture that preceded it, colonialists would leave an indelible mark on the landscape.

In 1890, with the intent to boost the West’s industrial appeal, the Federal Government initiated the infill of Snauq. For the next 48 years, the reclaimed land would be aptly dubbed “Industrial Island” until Granville Island, for its position under the Granville Street bridge, would become it’s colloquial eponym (Vancouver History).



Granville Island infill, 1916; Image courtesy of the Vancouver Archives; item: A-8-25.2

After 1899, with the forced displacement of the MST to the Capilano Indian Reserve, “Industrial Island” was contested land. The Federal Government, the Canadian Pacific Railroad, and local businesses each staked claim until 1916 when the Federal Government asserted control (Vancouver Heritage Foundation). Industrial Island would, for the remainder of this period, epitomize colonialism's extractive ethos. The site would be characterized, until the mid-1960s, by dense industrial activity.

In 1916, under the purview of The Harbour Commission (today, The National Mortgage and Housing Corporation), Snaug was sold off parcel by parcel. Knowing the Squamish couldn't compete with deep-pocketed industrialists with a thirst for waterfront property, the Squamish were “wilfully separated from their means of subsistence and culture and stripped of their sovereignty”, bound by the capitalistic new world order and forced into a relationship of commodification with their land and water (Muckle, 111).

In the 1950s, Granville Island would be the site of frequent fires - aging logging and industrial infrastructure providing ideal kindling. Instead of restoring destroyed property, shop keeps abandoned their worksites for the mainland and Granville Island fell deeper into disrepair (Fazel, 7).

In response to the deteriorating water quality and waning industrial productivity, Granville Island was the subject of a grand urban renewal project that sought to improve public perception of the waterfront and the city by extension (Vancouver Heritage Foundation). Vancouver was in the midst of a global marketing campaign that sought to put the city on the world stage, with efforts culminating in the 1986 World Exposition.

With emphasis on Granville Island's industrial program falling out of political favour, then MP Ron Basford, made the redevelopment of Granville Island his political platform. In 1973, ownership of the island was transferred to The Canada Mortgage and Housing, and four years later redevelopment began (Vancouver Heritage Foundation). Joost Bakker and Norman Hotson (founders of what would become DIALOG) led the design of Granville Island's transmutation to public space. The emphasis would be placed on maintaining its maritime industrial aesthetic, and in 1978, Granville Island Public Market - the flagship public-facing operation - opened for business.



Pierre Trudeau at Granville Island with local MP Ron Basford before the Federal acquisition, 1973, Image courtesy of CBC

Granville Island was, and to some extent still is, Vancouver's Art's District. Accompanying the Public Market are theatres, studios, arts workshops and after 1980, Emily Carr University of Art and Design - the confluence of which would usher in Granville Island's heyday of expression (Vancouver Heritage Foundation).

As is often the case in the ecology of urban succession, what followed dense artistry was gentrification and loss of authenticity. Granville Island today maintains vestiges of this character and with the relocation of Emily Carr University in 2017, and like the corrugated industrial edifices before them, the empty university grounds, today, stand as monument to yet another bygone era.



Granville Island, today, image courtesy of Tourism Canada

Granville Island, today, is Vancouver's global touchpoint as a tourist destination, its display case of cultural importance. While the husks of industry remain, gone are the smokestacks and log booms, in their place - murals, fruit stands and theatre marquees. Prominent among Granville Island's merchandise, is a preponderance of maple syrup and Indigenous art: totems, masks, statuettes, lanyards. What becomes clear as you walk its streets, is that it's still just as extractive as it was. Now, however, instead of softwood - Granville Island hawks culture. Granville Island's economy today and its focus on Indigenous art, is as socially extractive as Industrial Island's was resource extractive - value is placed on the product instead of people or culture.

The story is still being written, deep within the infill, beneath the dredge, under the cataclysm of imposition and hecatomb of culture and ecology lies the seed of how we as a people - and indeed, as landscape architects - can change the narrative. Snauq is not entirely lost, as it exists, today, as a Landscape in Time.

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