

## **Matt Hern on Creating Cities for Citizens**

Am Johal, Rable News, 2008-04-21

**Am Johal: Tell me about your concern with the discourses around security in cities that you write about in your book.**

**Matt Hern:** I've been touring all over North America for much of the last year in support of this new book *Watch Yourself: Why Safer Isn't Always Better* engaging with different publics about the expansion of safety-first doctrines. I talk about working with kids and having my own kids, the uses of public space and what it does to a city.

I was initially interested in kids, as a parent and someone who works a lot with kids. When I was young I walked three miles to school, like everyone else. Now I would never let my daughter do the same, nor would any of my friends let their kids do that. Schools around North America have stopped doing stuff like playing dodge ball or tag, or doing certain kinds of field trips because they're too risky. But those kinds of rationales and arguments about restricting the behaviour of kids is expanded into the larger public sphere, as authorities use security rationales for controlling and restricting public behaviour of all kinds.

The BIA [Business Improvement Association] here on Commercial Drive, for example - they spend huge amounts of money to have security guards walk up and down the street. Why are they spending the neighbourhood's money on this specific rendition of security? It inculcates a kind of security atmosphere that expands the BIA's authority into the ostensibly public sphere of the sidewalk – it's the private control of public space. They say if you have nothing to worry about, what are you afraid of? It's a dead end argument.

People often speak of a post-9/11 reality, but I think that was one more watershed – it sped up a trajectory that was already well underway. We need to challenge safety-first rationales at every level – to never let the security ethic overtake the community ethic. Never let the safe thing overwhelm the right thing.

**The nature of security is often built around a populist discourse. I was at a meeting the other day where we were talking about policing. One of the politicians there talked about the drunk at Nanaimo and Hastings who's been there for ten years. Five years ago, they started saying he was bad for business. Now they say he's a threat to children because he's three blocks from the elementary school. He's the same guy who's been there the whole time. Basically, it's the superimposition of political language onto social issues driven by populist rhetoric that's changed. It is difficult to challenge or synthesize a complicated response in to a sound bite. The public sphere has become altered, tainted, distorted in these types of Olympic environments, especially related to security matters.**

It's so valuable for certain sectors in society to jump on this agenda particularly in the current environment. Citing "security" trumps all sorts of conversations happening in the city. The Olympics are so important because they provide cover for those agendas and they hide all sorts of social issues like homelessness and addiction.

It shows what sectors of our culture are underdeveloped, which institutions are less trained, less sympathetic to the broader public interest. We are given simplistic answers. Like when the Olympics come, we have to clean up the Downtown Eastside. What do you mean we have to clean it up? The metaphors are the trash bin and the recycling depot, but we have to challenge it with, "what do you mean exactly?" The language is very simple, but is built with largely effective strategies around communication, marketing and promotion.

The Olympics are bringing together a number of sectors that view the city as a form of wealth generation, rather than as a collection of citizens. As Bob Rennie said, the Olympics is a \$5 billion dollar marketing campaign for Vancouver, and very specific sectors will profit, while others will suffer.

There has been a profound failure of the civil service, a sense of political drift on social matters which cuts at all levels of government built on the unassailability of neo-liberal assumptions. Political communications has divorced politics from its origins and made it in to a game, further distancing itself from the affairs of normal people – a dangerous thing in an already dubious and disreputable profession. Why is there such a lack of initiative and leadership when the times clearly call for bold and immediate gestures?

I have spent much of the last year interviewing key power brokers in the city from politicians to academics to non-profit people to developers for this new book on Vancouver I am just completing.

So many of these folks seem genuinely befuddled by the affordability issues. The city is turning rapidly in a way, a shift in the capacity of everyday people to get by. I think that those lack of ideas, the lack of political will, it's due to a certain smugness. We all read these reports about Vancouver being the #1 most livable city in the world and even the power brokers become are complacently unaware of everyday realities. Some places in our region like San Francisco and Portland are frankly ahead of us in terms of taking active leadership – not far, but at least beginning to think about how to actively create public discourses and projects for affordability.

Right now Vancouver absolutely has to be confronting market forces and creating a city of citizens rather than one of purely economic subjects constantly deferring to international capital flows.

Tell me about the Commercial Drive Car Free Festival. Is it a sustainable socialist plot?

Four years ago, we started the Car Free Commercial Drive Festival to get it going. Some friends got together and 25,000 people showed up. Then the following year,

50,000. Now four more neighbourhoods have joined the project and we're holding neighbourhood car-free festivals all over the city on the same day, June 15. We are expecting about 100,000 people to come out.

We are trying to imagine what a sustainable neighbourhood might look like, to imagine what the city would look like with much less traffic. We want to explore the idea that neighbourhoods can control their streets, that an ecological and ethical city are one and the same, and that environmental sustainability has to be synonymous with social sustainability.

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