

First impressions of Shangri-La:

Briefly recalling a 'Lost Horizon' decades after its disappearance (2008):

In this afternoon's drive home, I reflected on the paperback of essays read before bed last night entitled: '*Imagining BC.*' Several of the short essays were written by immigrants, recounting their first impressions of British Columbia. In flipping through, I recalled my own impressions after stepping outside the Canadian Pacific Railway station on Main St., Vancouver, in July, 1974:

The first sniff of the cool air was redolent of the sawmills on nearby False Creek: a disappointment given that the 'hip' Vancouver of imagining had not been a brawny industrial city. I also wondered why there was no tang of the ocean as in grey Saint John, New Brunswick— my only template of a port city.

In gingerly heading north on Main Street in search of a lodging (metal suitcase banging against leg), the nostrils were further assailed by stale air from the beer parlours. Then in crossing Pender St. came the first wafts of cheap incense and Chinese noodles. So where were the hippies?

Along the gauntlet of Skid Row, old Chinese women shuffled past burly native Indians with feathers in cowboy hats. More than one grizzled man leaned from a doorway to curiously eye the new arrival. Those first draughts of the spirit of the west were inhaled with equal measures of headiness and menace...

After the first night in the seamy Pacific Hotel, I collected my bicycle from the train station baggage depot and rode across the Granville Bridge and west into Kitsilano. In the sweaty pedal up 10th Ave. into Point Grey amid sweeping vistas of the Burrard Inlet and north shore mountains, the smell of Skid Row on my clothes gradually dissipated. Although I had a few more nights to endure on Main St., an excitement was growing of having indeed, arrived in a Shangri-La. In that initial wonder of a hidden valley amid a mountain fastness— I would scarcely have been surprised to find amid the gigantic stumps and undergrowth of Stanley Park, the footprints of dinosaurs...

In my frantic search for a job in the next few days, I wondered whether I was really in Canada— the mountains, the wild street scene being so alien from the drab and sedate Canada I knew. The first sight of the maple leaf flying outside the post office building on Hamilton St. was both incongruous and reassuring.

While it was a relief to get away from Skid Row into a bedsitting room in the west end, I still felt amid uneasy amid what seemed a restless denizen of go-getters. In the first foray into the downtown pubs, I was struck by just how loudly middle-aged men dressed and talked (First glimpses of the legendary Social Credit car dealers?) Then in walks past the Howe St. stock market, the vulgar Hornby St. Nightclub strip and 4th Ave. Kitsilano (1960s flower power long gone), I sensed that the true heart of the city was back on Main St. among the retired loggers, Chinese and native Indians.

Yet it was not until starting my first job in the stacks of Vancouver Public Library that I made real contact with any locals. Those first few were fellow book runners who knew no other province than B.C. Most striking was their ignorance about the rest of the country (“So you’re from Newfoundland?”).

Of course, back in the mid-1970s Vancouver was still overwhelmingly white and English speaking. It was not until the next decade—seemingly after the UN ‘Habitat’ conference of 1976—that Vancouver began to define itself as an emerging ‘global’ city. The character of the city fundamentally changed over the subsequent decades as the transplants (like me) from other provinces were joined by the waves of immigrants from overseas. Yet by the late 1970s, all vestiges of the Northwest Shangri-La had already passed into history.

In my increasingly rare trips downtown—it is eerie to look to the northern horizon from a trendy Hollywood North and see from a now alien city—the same mountains...

In that thought, I began the winding home stretch though the Barnet Highway in view of the darkly forested Eagle Mountain rising beyond Indian Arm. As it has been though twenty years of commuting, in every kilometer eastward from Burnaby—tensions began to ease...

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