



Granville Island

Granville Island: From Sandbar to Raising the Bar

Over a century ago, the aboriginal villagers of Snaug (pronounced SNUH-owg) fished the rich tidal basin of False Creek at low tide off a sandbar that disappeared at high tide. Today, that sandbar, expanded to 38 acres with additional fill and known as Granville Island, is owned and managed by the Government of Canada.

In 1915, the Vancouver Harbour Commission approved a reclamation project whereby a vast quantity of mud from the False Creek floor was used to create a 34-acre island port for the booming mining and forestry industries. “Mud Island”, as it was called, became the clanging, smoking, manufacturing center for shingles, chains, barrels, wire rope, saws, rivets, boilers, and paint.

By the Roaring Twenties, the Island housed some of Vancouver’s largest manufacturing operations, and at the end of the 1930s, additional fill expanded the Island to its current acreage and it hosted more than 40 businesses. World War II furthered the frenzy, but soon after, a series of fires and a changing economy saw manufacturers leave “Industrial Island” for the suburbs. Most of the filthy factories and derelict warehouses became a grimy eyesore.

An exception to that was the three acres occupied by Ocean Construction Supplies, which has been operating a concrete plant on the Island since 1917. The Island retained its

industrial character until 1972 when the federal government, spearheaded by the newly appointed Minister of Urban Affairs (and later Senator) Stanley Ronald “Ron” Basford, recognized its potential and announced a redevelopment scheme. His passion for the project gave him the nickname of “Mr. Granville Island.”

The Granville Island Concept – recycling old buildings with an orchestrated mix of modern new tenants – would turn Granville Island into a “people place”. Control over the Island was transferred from the National Harbours Board to Canada Mortgage and Housing Corporation (CMHC), which was much more used to the concept of redevelopment.

Over the next ten years, the federal government invested \$24.7 million to create the unique urban oasis. A five-member Granville Island Trust was appointed to oversee the building of a seawall around the Island, the relocation of most of the industrial businesses, and the introduction of professional theatres, a college campus, a microbrewery, art studios and crafts shops, restaurants, and other businesses that cater to tourists and local shoppers.

Once again, the exception was Ocean’s concrete operations. Why didn’t it move? Well, it had a lease that ran until 2003, making it expensive to get rid of it. Also, concrete is perishable; only about two hours are allowed from the time it’s produced until the time it’s placed. And False Creek allowed the company to bring in the various grades of rocks and sand it needed by barge. The location is literally ideal for building downtown Vancouver, because the nearest industrial location for another plant is miles away. But Ocean, if it was to survive public opinion, had to become an extraordinary corporate citizen, so its big, now gaily coloured, cement trucks would be allowed to rumble through the upscale Island traffic. That lease, by the way, has been renewed for another 50 years.



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The first and main attraction, though, was the Granville Island Public Market, opened in July 1979 with 26 independently-owned food stalls, and plenty of “day table” space for local growers with seasonal products. The government successfully created an urban waterfront village that fostered diverse cultural, educational, and commercial enterprises, while maintaining the Island’s historic, and now as charming as it is clean, industrial character.

In keeping with the Granville Island Concept, special features were kept or enhanced. Most of the buildings have retained their metal siding, large doors, and heavy timber structures. There are no street lights. No curbs. Old railway lines still poke through the asphalt. Squeezed between the Emily Carr University of Art + Design and the Arts Club Theatre, Ocean’s oversized concrete trucks meld seamlessly with easel-toting art students, local shoppers, delighted tourists and svelte theatre-goers.

What the Canadian government developed is simply the most successful urban redevelopment in North America, which has drawn — and continues to draw — international attention from planners globally. In 2002, Great Markets Great Cities presented Granville Island with a PPS Award of Merit for its contribution to the social, economic, and environmental health of Vancouver. In 2004, Project for Public Spaces, a New York-based nonprofit, named Granville Island the “Best Neighborhood in North America” because of its successful transformation in the 1970s from an industrial wasteland to one of the most beloved public spaces in Vancouver.

The Island is a jewel in the Canadian government’s development crown but it’s just as treasured by locals and tourists for its unique offerings. Granville Island, itself a piece of art and a destination for more than 10 million people who visit the Island annually, provides a rare example of government as an urban redevelopment standard-setter, creative marketer, and manager in one complete package. CMHC still manages the operationally self-sustaining Granville Island, now home to more than 300 businesses, marinas, fish-mongers, studios and cultural facilities, employing a total of more than 3,000 people.