



Strait and Narrows Podcast Script

Episode 3: Roads, Bridge and Tunnels

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Intro

Throughout my life, I've lived in a number of cities, big and small, in both well-knit communities **and** at the edges of suburbia. One thing I took for granted was how the way I moved around each place affected my connection to those cities.

We all think of roads and bridges as just **things** that get us from point A to B. They can ruin your mornings and make you hate where you live. (pause) But what about the things you LOVE about the city? What if - they're a result of these roads and bridges... **or** - lack of them?

Every year, proposals for new roads are always met with joy or anger. But is this just something we accept, or does history offer examples of *another* choice?

To better understand how moving through the city is connected to our experiences, I sat down with two individuals with different backgrounds to dig deeper into how *getting around* can affect our daily lives.

SC Interview Transcription

My name is Shirley Chan. I'm now retired from my position with Health Canada. Where I worked as Director of Sustainable Development and as a regional director general.

Sitting down with Shirley in her lovingly restored Westside home, you can see generations of history in the mantle photos, including images of her as a child with her siblings, her own children, and grandchildren.

My great grandfather came to Canada in 1879, for the Gold Rush. So, our family has four generations here.

I grew up in Strathcona. I'm best known as a community activist who fought to save our home and our community from demolition and from the freeway.

I wanted to know what it was like to live in Strathcona when she was young.

When I was growing up in Strathcona, I always felt very secure. It was, during my time, a predominantly Chinese neighbourhood. My parents chose to live there because they wanted their children to learn to speak Chinese and to understand the Chinese culture.

The community was tight. Mother knew a lot of people because she helped many. My father, who worked in Chinatown, was highly respected because he worked for the Chan Family Association as their secretary treasurer. Being known as a scholar, people would consult him for advice, and he wrote a lot of letters for people, and he wrote articles in the Chinese paper. So, as a family, we were quite well known, and mother helped somebody on every block. So when it came time for organizing, it was easy. She just identified people on every block that she could ask to help, and she called them block captains.

Shirley is one of Vancouver's earliest activists. - But she didn't start out wanting to save the world.

I had always thought I would become a teacher. That's really what I knew. And so I thought, well, my way out of the ghetto, as my parents said, would be to go to university. And they valued education, so, that was something they encouraged for all their children. And I went to Simon Fraser because I had a bit of a rebel in me. Instead of going to the established UBC, I wanted to try the new university.

I met so many more people. It was stimulating intellectually. What surprised me was the mixing (between). At Simon Fraser was a very liberated environment (so we), but we also liberated the faculty club, and we were not respectful of the old traditions. And Simon Fraser was very different than UBC in that way.

Shirley referred to Strathcona - as the ghetto - so I wanted to know - just what happened to change it from the secure community where she spent her childhood to one she needed to escape.

We first rented in Strathcona, probably in about 1950, after my dad got here. And we lived in a house, that was demolished to make way for public housing for the McLean park. And so then we bought in '55, a home from the Minicello family on Keefer St. It was then that we were became aware, in '57, that the neighbourhood was going through a lot of change, and that the government was going to tear down the old, blighted housing, and build new housing for people to live in.

The 1957 redevelopment study said they were gonna demolish 32 block of Strathcona. And they had started along Gore Avenue because that would help to break the connection between Strathcona and Chinatown. And disperse the Chinese, that was one of the objectives.

Given their position in the community, Shirley's parents refused to accept their fate. Up against intimidating odds, what could they do?

So, my parents decided in 1957 with one of our neighbours who brought us the information, to put together a petition and notify all the neighbours, and so mother, who's just a natural born organizer, grabbed a shopping bag, and, um, and went door knocking, telling people about what was happening, using the city's flyer, which was just in English of course, they didn't print anything in Chinese in those days, and uh, asked people to make a small donation to help us hire a lawyer who could speak for us, or someone who could write a brief to council.

Unfortunately, as a minority in a largely Caucasian city, and not being represented at the council level, the community found it hard - to make an impact.

In '65, phase two came, and, we did the same thing. We did not succeed in getting council to change their plans. Our community continued to shrink. Houses began to be demolished across the street from our family home. The whole block was demolished. On the block to our east, that was also demolished to make way for a replacement park, cause they'd built public housing on the old park, right? And, uh, so we saw, I guess by 1968, 11 blocks had been demolished, public housing had been built on McLean Park and was expanded. The school playground was being developed. We had empty lots where Moa Don Co-op is today. It was sold to a developer.

So, when '68 came around, and we heard this was phase three, we knew this was the last chance. They were going to demolish the remaining 21 blocks, and this was our last stand.

By this time, Shirley's generation had grown up watching each other's homes be destroyed and their neighbourhood become less recognizable. Determined to continue her parents' efforts, Shirley was met by something unexpected.

~~We went back out to organize the neighbourhood again, but~~ by then, many of us had grown up, so we were able to write our own briefs, speak for ourselves, we had enough English that we could do this. Well, we managed to get through to the social planners at city hall. Darlene Marzari, was hired to be a social planner to help us relocate.

With Darlene's help and her boss's approval that she help us with our fight to either stop urban renewal her job was to help us do what we wanted as opposed to help us relocate.

Darlene turned out to be a valuable ally.

Darlene brought in some other help for us. She went and got legal help, by going to UBC where her husband taught, and she recruited Mike Harcourt and his buddies who were law students, to come and help us. And then, they got Margaret Mitchell from neighbourhood service Association to get us a community organizer.

We organized all the neighbours, and we called meetings, and we got Chinatown's support. So that expanded our strength beyond our boundaries.

On the surface, the battle of Strathcona seemed to be about gentrification. The Strathcona fight appeared, at the time, to be one of building dense, public housing. But by joining forces with other groups, it became starkly apparent that "Urban Renewal" was much larger than just tearing down run down houses.

Possible rewrite: In the beginning, the fight against urban renewal - was a fight against the displacement - of the people of Strathcona. But after joining forces with other groups, it was revealed that - #UrbanRenewal - was about much more than just tearing down old houses.

The transportation plan for Vancouver was a freeway plan, it was not about transit, it was not a transportation plan. And so they had different options for freeways, all of which would carve up Chinatown. So it would be a third crossing, a waterfront freeway, and then it would cut through Chinatown along Carroll Street and Columbia Street. It was the Columbia Connector, that the North South East West Freeways would connect.

The community was not willing to accept *that* vision of the future.

But on December 18, just before Christmas, we had a big public meeting at Gibbs boys club, and we had an overflow crowd and out of that meeting, we formed the Strathcona Property Owners and Tenants Association.

I'd gone to visit council members, I was told, it's too late, the decisions already been made. I was too naive to understand that I had to stop, so we kept going.

Standing up to elected officials - can be intimidating, but for Shirley and her fellow organizers, it was a fight that needed to happen. They had stood up as the voices for their community, and now had to honour that position.

Council was probably the last to change its mind. Because we were very noisy, and we would ask for meetings with individual members of council, we had protests, marches, we got Chinatown's support, we found common cause with the freeway movement.

So if council wouldn't budge, despite protests, petitions, meetings and combined support, what was it - that changed their mind? Well, sometimes, it turns out, going over your leaders' heads is a good idea.

When Paul Hillier came to town as a speaker, he was the minister of transport responsible for housing. Having a federal minister hear our case at a chinese banquet where we also sold tickets to raise money, we go through to him. The Minister had been invited to take a bus tour of the area, so they could see why they needed the funding for urban renewal, and why the freeway needed to happen. Well we got down there the next morning as they were boarding the bus, to meet the minister. Paul Hillier invited me to sit with him on the bus. So I got to talk to the minister, I got to bend his ear, and so while the, what we called the windshield survey was going on on the bus, here's why, look at that sagging porch or look at that bad roof and see these row houses, how run down they look. Of course nobody was fixing their houses because nobody

could get a permit to fix anything, and the streets were dirty because the city didn't send sweepers through the neighbourhood. So, I got to say, well, you know, the roof may be sagging, but the house lines are true. The size of these homes are important to the community. So he went back to Ottawa and declared a moratorium on urban renewal until he got a better sense as to what to do next.

While a moratorium helped stall the project, it was not completely off the table. Thankfully, even in the road building world of the 60's and 70's, staying on budget could make or break support from the federal government.

We fought the freeway through the neighbourhood, and we fought the demolition of homes. Because the freeway. The pricetag, which by this point escalated in '73, to over \$200 million, I know that sounds like nothing today. But that was a lot of money. The federal government said, since the community doesn't support the freeway, there won't be any money for the freeway. So the federal pulled their dollars, and that killed the freeway.

For now, we have a constant reminder in Vancouver's skyline of that ill-fated project.

They did build the georgia viaduct to freeway scale, and it's there today as an underutilized I guess homage to the freeway network that would have been.

Had they

The success of their fight, while helping to stop an inner-city freeway system and the demolition of their homes, had other lasting effects on the city and how we, as residents, speak up about how we want our communities to look.

But it also changed the way communities are consulted by council in planning their cities, right? So it gave a voice to citizens, cause we were people who were voiceless, and we managed over time. It took, from 1957 till 1968, which is 11 years for me to grow to up, and other people like me to grow up in Strathcona so that we found our own voices, right, and we gave voice to other citizens.

Had they not rallied together, what would the consequences have been?

We would have been demolished. You would see in place of some of the Victorian homes that are still there, three story walk-ups. and , uh, Chinatown would have declined faster than it has done. We woulda had some very major freeways through our city. And we wouldn't have coal harbour today, because that would have been a waterfront freeway, and we would have been like so many American and like Montreal and Toronto, that have separated from the waterfront by freeway.

There are those that believe that transit would work better through the city, but then it would have divided communities. Wherever freeways run they tend to divide communities on either side of it, and the air quality is very poor. So our city would be a very different place, I think, not just strathcona.

I wanted to know if Shirley thinks her story, and the story of the protection of Strathcona and Chinatown, are ones that today's generation recognizes?

They may have lost the memory, but they enjoy the legacy. And I think that there are those who want to tell the story.

After almost forty years, as the memory of the freeway fades for younger generations, I asked what lasting effect Shirley hopes the incredible effort of her family and friends has had on the city.

I want to be able to encourage citizens who sometimes feels discouraged, that they can make a difference. People can organize and know that they can be heard. And So I believe that citizens are passionate about something, and if they can a common cause with other communities, that they can achieve more than if fighting alone.

JC Interview Transcription

NOTE: I start out referring to him as Mayor Cote, and then switch to Jonathan just until we get the the part when he becomes Mayor, going back to Mayor Cote again. If anyone disagrees, and thinks I should just use his first name, I'm fine with that, just concerned about propriety or whatever.

How to manage the movement of vehicles is a concern for every municipality in this region, regardless of size. For some cities, historic bones mean working with limited space while maintaining the qualities that make them desirable places to live.

On the banks of the Fraser River, one mayor has recognized, through his own experiences, that maintaining that balance is tricky, but the reward could be worth the effort.

My name is Jonathan Cote. I'm the mayor of City of New Westminster. I've been mayor for about a year and a half now.

I've lived in New Westminster for my entire adult life, but grew up all over the Metro Vancouver region.

We met Mayor Cote in his office in the New Westminster city hall, with a picture window view of the historic city centre, not to mention his downtown condo, where he walks or bikes from every day. He explained to us, though, that his childhood experience was different.

Growing up as a child I lived in pretty typical suburban neighbourhoods, which is, you know, really not uncommon in North America. I definitely remember biking a lot, and even walking a lot, but you know, to go anywhere would be a half hour bike ride or even longer of a walk, so what that often meant, you know, in a car to go to most shopping trips or most destination, and

that just almost became a bit of a habit growing up. You just get used to that's how you get around.

I think by age 17 seventeen I had a driver's licence, and was certainly very excited to have that opportunity to drive because living in a car dependent neighbourhood, you really are stranded and very isolated and the driver's licence really became the ticket to be able to expand your world.

Being practically the same age, and with a similar story of spending my youth trapped in suburbia, I was curious what kind of revelations Jonathan had when he made the switch from single family living to a dense urban life.

Moving to New Westminster, I started to discover that there's actually different alternatives to living and I have really kind of embraced and learn to love living in environments where you have more transportation choices.

It's a completely different dynamic to how we're living now to how I recall growing up.

You know, also discovering a neighbourhood where can walk to most places. For the most part we live within walking distance to the skytrain, we live walking distance of our kids' school, city hall, and there's a bus stop that my wife catches every single morning. And it's amazing when your transportation really gets limited down to you know under 15 walk or transit trips, it actually really does change your life, and certainly that was very attractive to us in making that move.

Short walks to the shops, school and work - sound great, but was the change really that transformational?

Certainly I think there's been some time savings in terms of having everything in close proximity, but, it really even just changes your relationship with the community and the city. And you view things differently when you're out on the street and running into people, or getting to know the business owners in your local neighbourhood. It's a different mindset, and it's one that we've actually really began to love.

I can empathize with Jonathan and his wife - who embraced urban life, but I wondered if the experience has been as positive for his children.

I have three daughters. My oldest daughter is eight years old, middle daughter is seven and the youngest daughter is three. So, we definitely have our hands full, that's for sure. The older child is starting to wanting to get a little more independent. You know I'm a bit advocate of, you know, having kids be able to explore and interact with their neighbourhoods. Being in a bit more urban environment, I'm a little more cautious and it's not really the urban environment. It's actually even just the traffic. You know we live close to columbia street, which is a beautiful commercial main street, but it's also a pretty heavy traffic street. And if I think of the one thing that I worry

about, about my kids, is you know getting that phone call in terms of something happening on the roadway there.

Aside from the desire to live more connected to the city, Jonathan feels he's always had the calling - to be involved in how a place is shaped around the human experience.

I've always had a passion for cities. ~~Even as a teenager, I kind of grew up playing Sim City, and in University took a lot of urban geography. And sort of preliminary planning courses, so I'd always had that kind of interest.~~ And upon moving to New Westminster, really kind of, fell in love with the city, ~~and really kind of the opportunities that New Westminster had.~~

It's a city that's, given it's history and its age, really has some good urban bones, but had been a city that had really kind of been forgotten about for so many years. And just seeing the potential and the changes that happening in the city, really got me excited in getting involved, and, at a very young age, putting my name forward to run for city council.

Eleven years ago, Jonathan started his first term as a city councillor, with a focus on bringing long term, positive change to the City.

During my first campaign, I talked a lot about sustainability. It wasn't, at that stage, we're talking about 2005 right here, a big priority for the city of New Westminster, ~~and you know, even after getting elected, one of the first things I did was to draft the green action plan for the city.~~ So that was, you know, driving priority that I really wanted to emphasize that I really felt the city, at the time, wasn't taking it in full force.

New Westminster has long been a city that's had its challenging social issues, and proud to have, you know, really worked with a council that actually took a very different approach when it comes to the public places in the city. Really recognizing that, ~~you know, whether we're talking about our commercial streets or our parks, that~~ these are places that we don't want to turn our backs on, but we actually want to celebrate and have the community come out.

We're very fortunate I think to already have one of the most walkable communities in Metro Vancouver, but we've feel we've had to step it up in terms of how do we make that pedestrian environment more comfortable and more safe ~~given the volumes that we have, and given that we expect that particular form of mode share to grow significantly into the future.~~

So, is there something threatening the walkability of New Westminster?

Being located right at the geographical centre of Metro Vancouver, also means that we're the location for a significant amount of through traffic. We estimate that over 400,000 vehicles travel through our city each day, not stopping in the city of New Westminster. Just simply trying to get through the city. And to put that in context, New Westminster is really only 7 square miles large, so, we're 150 year old city, with the road network that was designed 150 years ago, which I think is a tremendous asset in that we've really developed a fine grained street network that can

be developed to be very pedestrian friendly and encourage sustainable transportation. But when you're trying plow 400K vehicles a day through that network, it leads to certainly a lot of congestion, and has created, you know, definitely some issues in our community.

To put that in context, 7 square miles is just slightly smaller than Sea Island in Richmond, a place with just enough space for an airport. Mayor Cote suggests that these traffic levels are a direct result of road expansion elsewhere in the region.

We've definitely seen a significant impact of vehicles travelling through the City of New Westminster and significant increase on the Pattullo bridge since the tolls were put in place on the Port Mann bridge. To me I think the whole situation actually shows that, there actually is a larger solution here to help manage and help control traffic congestion, and better utilize our road network. But it can't be done in kind of a haphazard way where you put a toll on one bridge, but then have a free alternative 3 kilometres down the road.

When we first having discussion about the Pattullo Bridge, and we'd been talking about it probably for a decade, the initial proposals were for an expanded bridge, 6 to potentially 8 lane bridge. And the city of new westminster was the first to point out that you can build a larger bridge there, but ultimately you're going to be connecting into the same road networks that does not really have the ability to see significant changes.

For Mayor Cote and his council, the idea of expanding the Pattullo Bridge seems to be an expensive solution to a problem that doesn't exist.

Traffic has actually been declining on both of those bridge, and most people don't realize that, and it's something that does not get any attention. But if you really think about it, why would you be spending an extra half billion dollars to expand the Pattullo bridge when history had shown that before the tolls were on the Port Mann traffic had actually been declining on that bridge over the last 20 years. Clearly it's not a good use of resources, and we essentially took the position that if we can put in a proper road pricing system in place here, building a four lane bridge, which is a lot more affordable, would actually more than enough serve the transportation needs that that bridge and that structure is supposed to serve.

Thankfully, the residents of New Westminster seem to be, for the most part, on the same page as their local government.

Transportation is the biggest issue that we face here. And we do a survey every year in the community and to no surprise, every single year, transportation is the top of the list. But what's interesting is that when we dig down a little bit further in the survey what transportation means to each resident is all a little bit different. I think there's significant frustration in the community about how much through traffic comes through our city, and how that negatively impacts the community.

There would be some residents in New Westminster that would kind of take your more traditional road building approach, that if we could only just build some more lanes, and help the traffic get through, that would somehow solve the problem. But I think, the vast majority of the community, and myself included, recognize that that's probably not going to solve the problem, and if anything, it would probably attract even more traffic a city that clearly doesn't need it.

I asked Mayor Cote just what kind of traffic has made its way onto the streets of New West as a result of the new Port Mann.

The Port Mann bridge was very much built under the guise of helping goods movement in the region. Well, because of the tolling system, trucks are avoiding that quite significantly, and they're trying to find free alternatives through our road network. And the problem is it's just not a good fit.

That just highlights that larger issue of how we sometimes in Metro Vancouver look at transportation in just kind of these one off project, and not look at all the other impacts that it has.

I think the big thing for us is to continue the efforts we're doing to make our city as walkable as possible. Whether you're talking about young people or you're talking about all the way to seniors, to actually feel comfortable there.

Jonathan is certainly a resident who practices what he preaches.

I walk my daughters to school most days of the week, and I often find it great because I get up onto the two local streets that lead up to the elementary school, and just to see streams of people coming together all in groups. And clearly people are connecting and saying this is how we want to get our kids to school.

I was curious, how he compares his youth to that of his three girls.

It's been a bit of an adjustment for me to change some of my travel patterns in my adult life. Whereas with my children, for them, it's just become second nature.

I hope that some of the things we're doing in our lifestyle right now are things they embrace through their lives, and you know obviously pass on to future generations as well, too.

Outro

From our historical roots to present day, how we move around our cities has immense impact on our day to day lives. Many of us take that for granted. We look for the fastest, most convenient way to move.

The legacy and success of Shirley Chan and the freeway fight has helped sustain the city's natural beauty and saved the waterfront we all know and love, from the fate of so many similar cities in North America. Spend just ten minutes on Seattle's waterfront—underneath two loud and massive levels of highway—and you can appreciate how important the battle of Strathcona was.

The trick is to not forget the impact of that battle, and to continue to invest in maintaining cities where people of all ages can live happily. For Mayor Cote, it means making the streets of New West safer for his daughters and their peers, so they can grow up in a place where they are comfortable to roam and enjoy their independence..

I'm proud to live in a place that makes moving through the city a largely positive experience. Being steps away from a vibrant shopping district, a quick bike ride to the waterfront, and a short drive to being surrounded by mountain forests; that connection is something I certainly don't take for granted.

This episode has featured music by Kimmortal, a Vancouver-based artist who spent her childhood in Surrey.