

European trip shows it is indeed a small world



BOB RANSFORD
VANCOUVER SUN

REAL ESTATE MATTERS

The world is indeed becoming a much smaller place. That's my latest revelation after wandering around Europe for the last week and a half.

The issues and concerns about the growth of our cities, about housing trends, about affordability of shelter, sustainable development, etc. are similar all over the world.

Reading the headlines in a London

newspaper was like déjà vu.

London submitted its bid to the International Olympic Committee Monday in an effort to win the right to host the 2012 summer games.

"Winning the 2012 bid to stage the Olympics would shape an entirely new city" blazed the headline on a story that spoke glowingly of the "dynamic, catalytic effect and enduring benefits of hosting the world's greatest sporting occasion."

Like Vancouver and the southeast False Creek area of our city, it seems London is relying on a successful Olympic bid to act as the springboard for a huge urban renewal project that will reshape a rundown waterfront "brown field" of industrial wasteland stretching along the Thames on the city's eastside.

The many politicians of different stripes who have come together to back what will likely be Britain's largest housing development ever, herald the project as the answer to the

city's looming housing shortage and housing affordability crisis. Sound familiar?

They are also unanimously hanging their hat on a successful Olympic bid as the way to "bind" everyone to a "sustainable solution" for the development of this once industrial waterfront.

Meanwhile, in the small villages of the Normandy region of France I visited there was talk about creeping urbanization and signs of new growth at the rural-urban edge.

One characteristic of Europe that is so noticeably different from our part of the world is the strong connection to the history and heritage of the region that remains a dominant influence in just about everything.

Whether it's the region's cultural ties to the Norman invaders of the medieval period that appear as influences in traditional village architecture, some of the cuisine and certainly the lore of the area, or whether it's

the more visible reminders of the D-Day invasion along Normandy's coast, the past plays a big role in the present, unlike our time-generic culture.

The best example of how heritage shapes modern-day growth is in Ifs, once a small village on the outskirts of the larger Normandy regional centre of Caen.

The village has now become a suburban extension of Caen. The history of the Second World War hits you right in the face as you drive through Ifs' most recent residential neighbourhood.

The new residential subdivision is a mixture of small single-family homes and three-storey townhouses, not unlike what you might see in Richmond or Coquitlam.

What is startling is the label attached to the subdivision. The area is referred to as "Canada" and every street in the subdivision bears the name of a Canadian province or city, as a tribute to the soldiers of the Black

Watch, members of the Royal Highland Regiment of Canada, the Canadian liberators who fought a bloody battle in the village, liberating the French 60 years ago.

I stood at the corner of "place du Vancouver" and "Avenue du Black Watch" outside a row of neatly manicured yards, realizing that our street-naming policies probably lack proper historical context. Wouldn't it be something if we expressed a level of pride equal to the gratitude expressed by the people of Ifs for our brave ancestors.

After all, it is a small world.

Bob Ransford is a public affairs and communications consultant with COUNTERPOINT Communications Inc.

He specializes in urban land use issues, and is a former real estate developer and is a director of the Urban Development Institute of Canada - Pacific region.

He can be contacted at ransford@counterpointcom.com