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Qualitative exploration of a potential urban transformation in Lynn Valley Town Centre, District of North Vancouver, BC

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I. Introduction

Lynn Valley Town Centre in the District of North Vancouver, BC is unique to the region in that it is located in a privileged geographic location on the foothills of the North Shore Mountains and in that it presents a distinctive road pattern within the surrounding neighbourhood. However, the existing urban condition, consisting of a standard 1970s era enclosed shopping mall dominated by parking areas, denies much of the inherent potential of the site. The Town Centre today may satisfy its most basic function of providing a commercial service to the community, but it does not honour where it is; it lacks a “sense of place.”¹

This research bulletin provides a “qualitative” (meaning concerning the hard to quantify qualities of the place as opposed to things that are measurable) exploration of how Lynn Valley Town Centre could undergo an urban transformation that would enhance its dialogue with the surrounding neighbourhood, and that would unveil its currently concealed *genius loci* or spirit of place. It is one of many possible explorations. Through a series of illustrations², it presents a number of suggestions for what the Town Centre could some day become and suggests a number of design strategies to get there.

This exploration of possibilities was commissioned by SxD and provided by Professor Ronald Walkey, a highly respected Vancouver area urban designer with over 40 years of professional experience working on many projects, including False Creek South and the Britannia Community Centre complex on Commercial Drive. It is not intended to suggest solutions for the site as that would be premature. Rather it is intended to accelerate conversations about the site by providing a fully rendered point of departure for same.

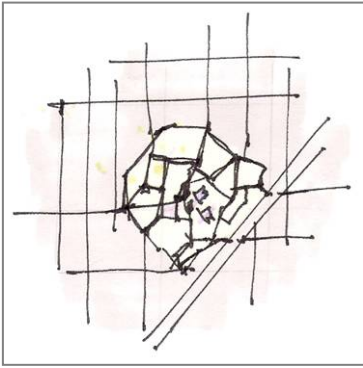


Figure 4-1:
Traditional town centres have
distinct road patterns, which
differentiate them from their
surrounding context.

II. Aspirations of Lynn Valley Town Centre beyond a conventional shopping mall

The character of Lynn Valley is due to its unique spatial location at the upland south facing edge of a vast river valley. “The Lynn Valley Plan”³ portrays the Town Centre as the heart of Lynn Valley, which must therefore reflect the Community’s aspirations, its pride, its heritage, and its future. The Plan’s noble aspirations envision the Town Centre as being a safe meeting place; being vibrant and attractive; celebrating the natural setting of Lynn Valley; being accessible and inviting to all; and, defining a Lynn Valley “sense of community.”⁴

The existing Town Centre with its conventional shopping mall does not fulfill any of the above. It satisfies the basic function of providing commercial service, but is an automobile oriented landscape dominated by parking lots and hostile to pedestrians. The current urban condition hence reflects what Christian Norberg-Schulz refers to as the *loss of place*⁵; present day environments whose character is usually distinguished by monotony and which no longer provide spatial enclosure and the intensity necessary to maintain street life.

Nevertheless, the Town Centre has great potential to be much more than what it now is. On the one hand, it sits in a spectacular foothill setting (technically a glacial terrace formed at the edges of the glacial advance down the valley during the last ice age). On the other, similarly to traditional town centres, it presents a distinct road pattern with the town center at a significant “five corners” crossroads configuration, which is quite unique in the region.

III. Strategies for building a vibrant attractive Town Centre

In order to meet the Town Center Plan’s aspirations, this preliminary qualitative exploration proposes a series of strategies to inform Lynn Valley Town Centre’s urban design and built form. These are motivated by: imagining a *real* Town Centre as a place people would want to go, a place with a bit of everything; learning from historic examples; insuring diversity - of units, of access, of commercial opportunities, and of civic activities; creating clear public place making, with civic/district ownership and well-defined spaces; providing enclosure and continuity at the centre; and ensuring the area is commercially viable in the current real estate marketplace, and is served by a practical and ecologically benign infrastructure.

Through a series of illustrations, the following design strategies are presented as possibilities that relate to unearthing a more meaningful street pattern, introducing green in the urban fabric, enhancing street liveability, and accommodating a more intense and lively urban environment – an urban environment that relates to human scale, reduces the influence of large open parking lots, and protects and frames the views within and out of the site.

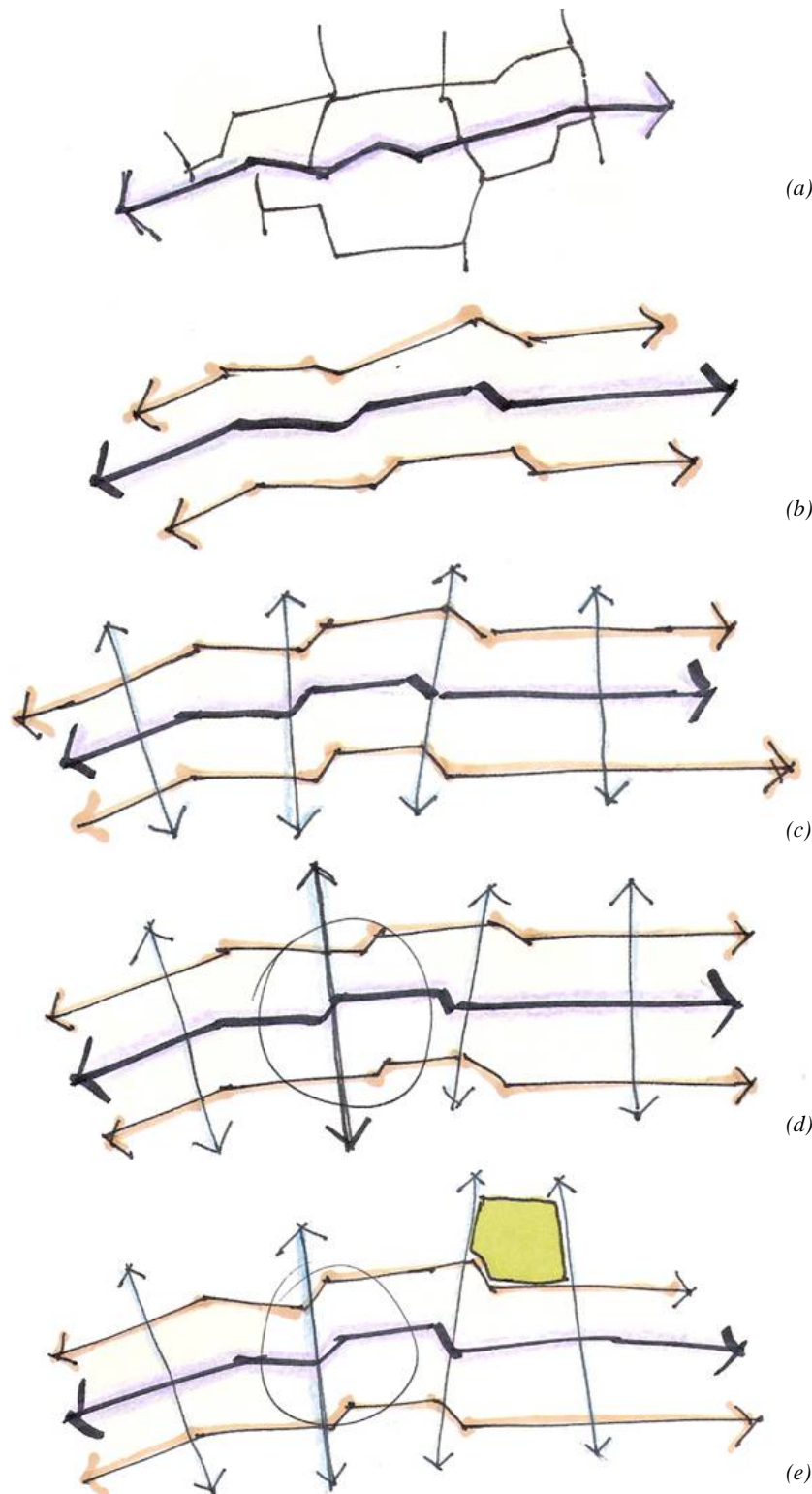


Figure 4-2:
This sequence of strategies unearths a concept for a "high street" in Lynn Valley Town Centre, currently masked by the mall and its large parking lots:

(a) A "high street" appears when one street is designated and recognized as the heart of the town.

(b) Mews or multi purpose roads back up the high street.

(c) A third street layer provides short block connections between the high street and the mews for vehicles and pedestrians.

(d) The town centre, as the recognizable heart of town, is located in a main intersection of the high street.

(e) Last, the public green: it is important to provide a bounded public open space somewhere within the town centre.

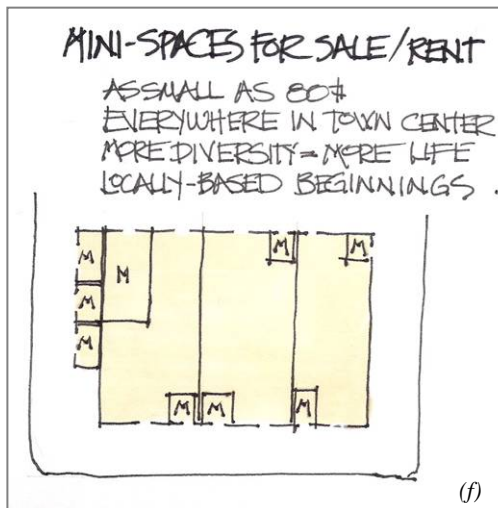
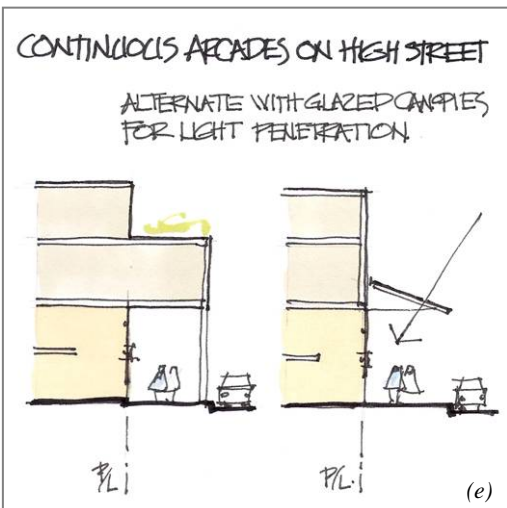
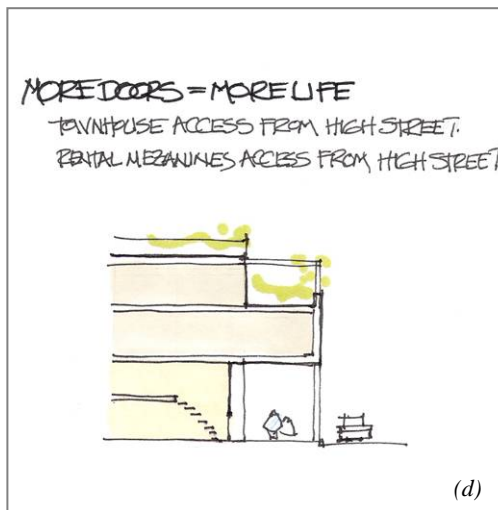
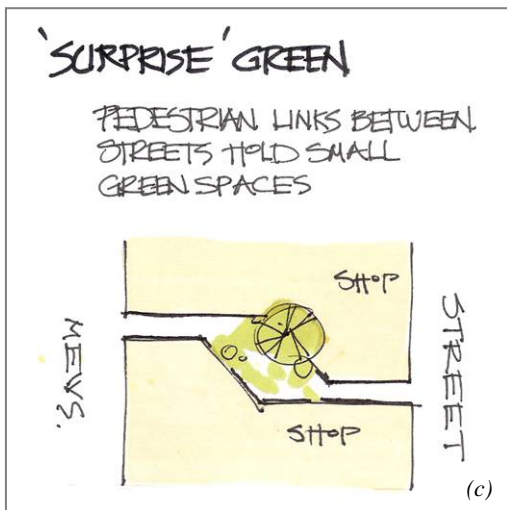
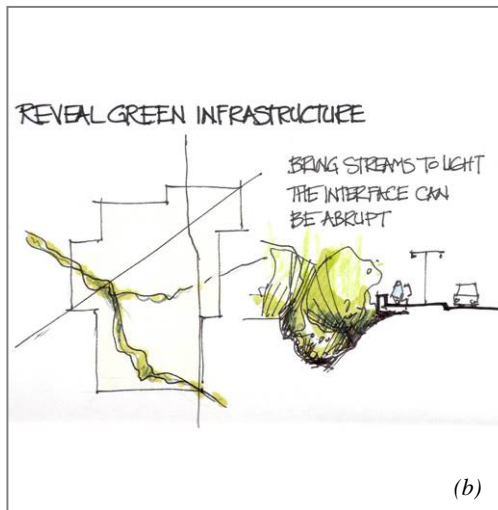


Figure 4-3:
Design strategies to create a liveable Town Centre:

(a) Occasional gaps in the urban fabric could provide linkages, places to gather, and enhance the quality of the Town Centre.

(b) Currently paved by the vast parking areas, the Town Centre could bring existing streams to light, revealing the green infrastructure. The interface between the urban and the natural could be abrupt, intensifying the dialogue between both.

(c) The pedestrian links between streets could hold small "surprise" green spaces, creating small and warm places for people to gather.

(d) Locating the access to both townhouses and rental mezzanines from the high street would enhance the street's liveability and increase safety with more "eyes on the street."

(e) Continuous arcades on the high street alternated with glazed canopies for light penetration would create an inviting and weather protected public realm.

(f) Providing mini spaces for sale or rent, as small as 80 sq ft and scattered all around the Town Centre, would bring diversity and consequently more life to the Town Centre. They could provide an opportunity for the local-based beginnings of future businesses.

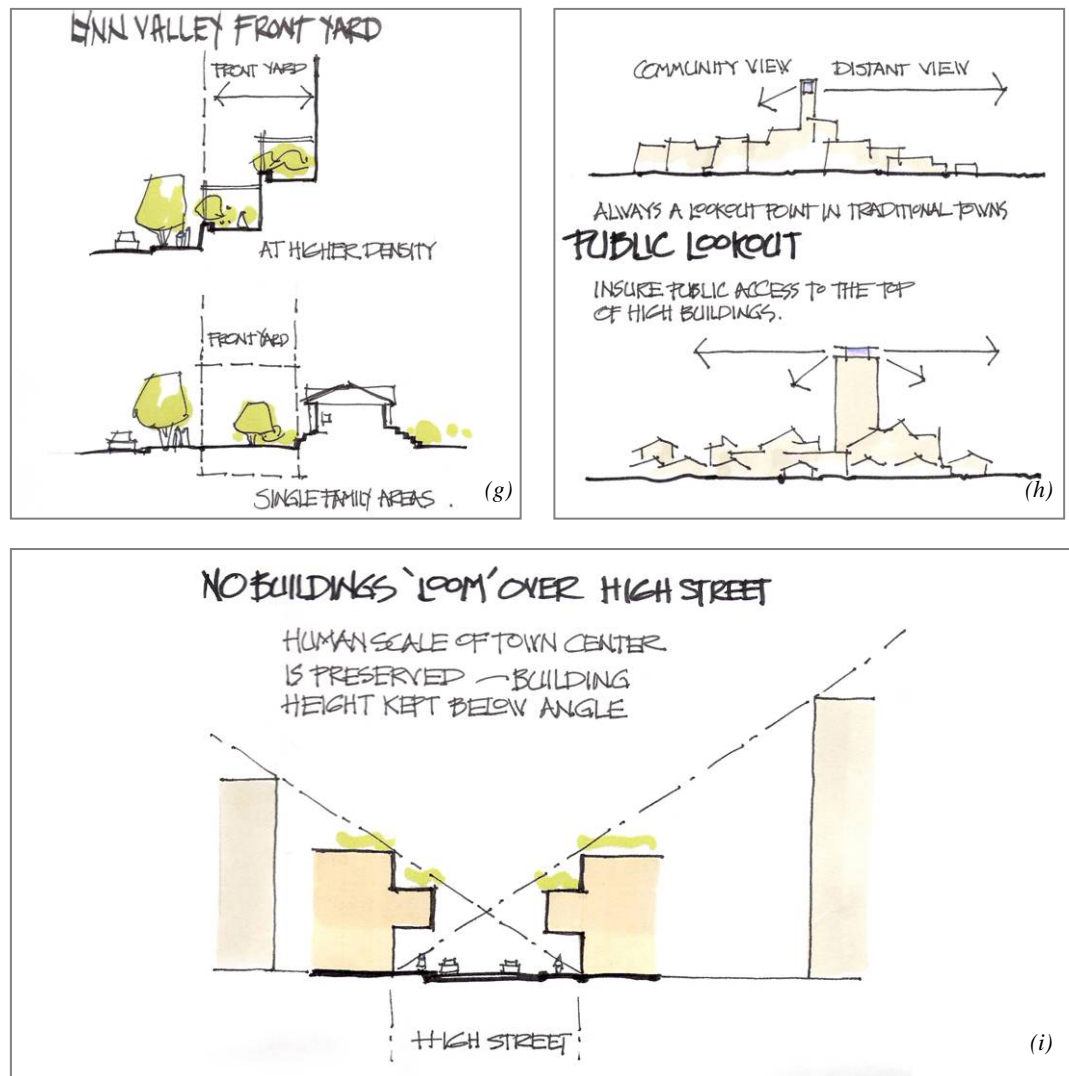
Figure 4-4:
Design strategies to create a liveable Town Centre (continued):

(g) Front yards play an important role in contributing to the existing sense of the Lynn Valley district. At higher densities, these could be terraced as shown to be compatible with conventional single family home front yards nearby.

(h) Traditional Town Centres always include a lookout point that allows for community view as well as for distant views. In modern Town Centres, public access to the top of high buildings might perform this role. Such buildings would stand out becoming identifiable icons that would mark the location of the Town Centre. Publicly accessible, they would be more likely to be embraced as a positive feature by area residents

(i) The Town Centre should have human scale and preserved views.

Keeping the height of taller buildings below the street angle, so none would loom over the high street.



IV. Pulling the strategies together: Creating a sense of place

Once the strategies are defined, the question is “how do these come together to meet the aspirations of Lynn Valley Town Centre Plan?” The following illustrations provide one view of how the strategies might pull together.

The strategies of high street, mews, and main street come together with pitched roofed and green roofed mixed-use buildings to create a diverse and inviting pedestrian environment. The orientation of streets and buildings would maintain views, connecting the Town Centre to its natural setting. Beyond ensuring commercial service as provided by today’s existing mall, the new Town Centre would combine retail, neighbourhood office, and residential activity. With consequently more “eyes on the street,” it would likely become a more populated and therefore more safe meeting place for everyone at all times of the day. The current car and asphalt dominated landscape could become a variety of pedestrian friendly open spaces, ensuring greenery and views and, in all, a sense of place.

Figures 4-5 and 4-6:
The mix of different building types, with taller pitched roofed buildings and lower green roofed ones, together with a variety of street types (high street, mews, and main street), would contribute to create a human scaled and spatially diverse pedestrian environment.

Buildings and streets would be oriented to allow views to penetrate the streetscape, creating a visual connection with the natural setting, and strengthening the Town Centre identity.

The continuous arcades on both sides of the high street would not only respond to local climate by providing weather protection, but they would also create a warm, accessible, and inviting atmosphere and would establish a cohesive visual character for the Town Centre.

The combination of residential and retail activity would guarantee continuous activity throughout the day. With more "eyes on the street," this would contribute to the Town Centre becoming an animated and safe meeting place for everyone at all times of the day.

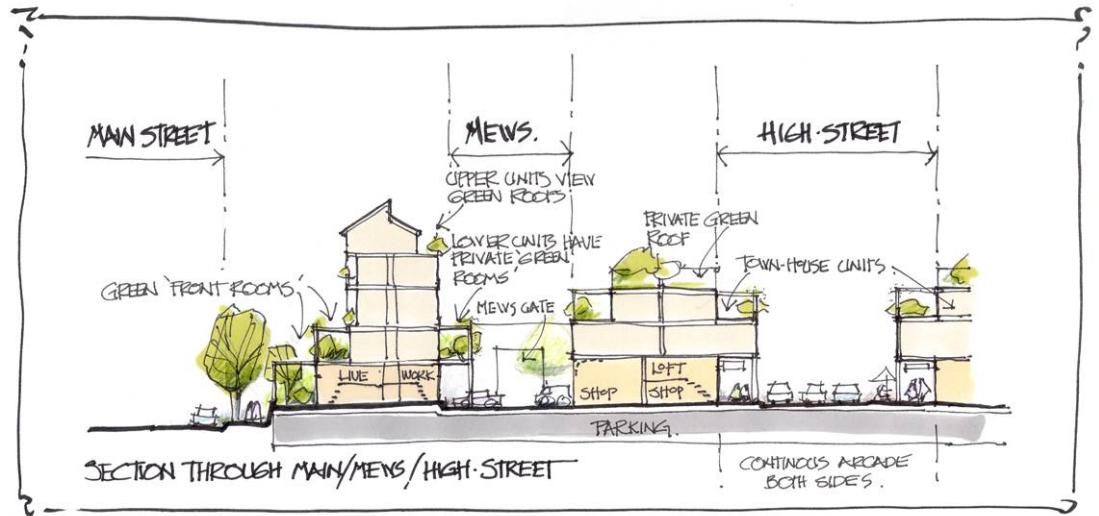


Figure 4-5

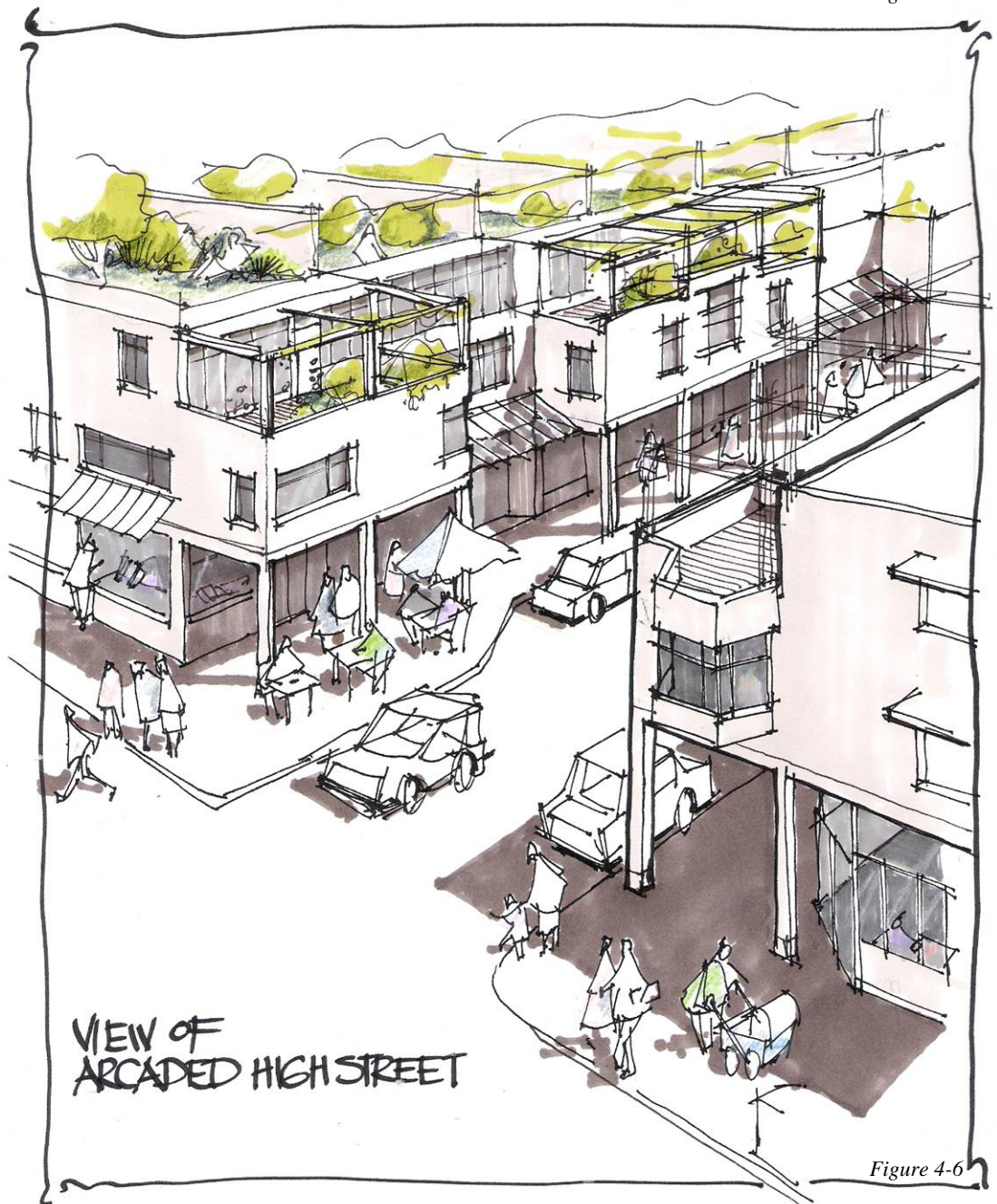


Figure 4-6

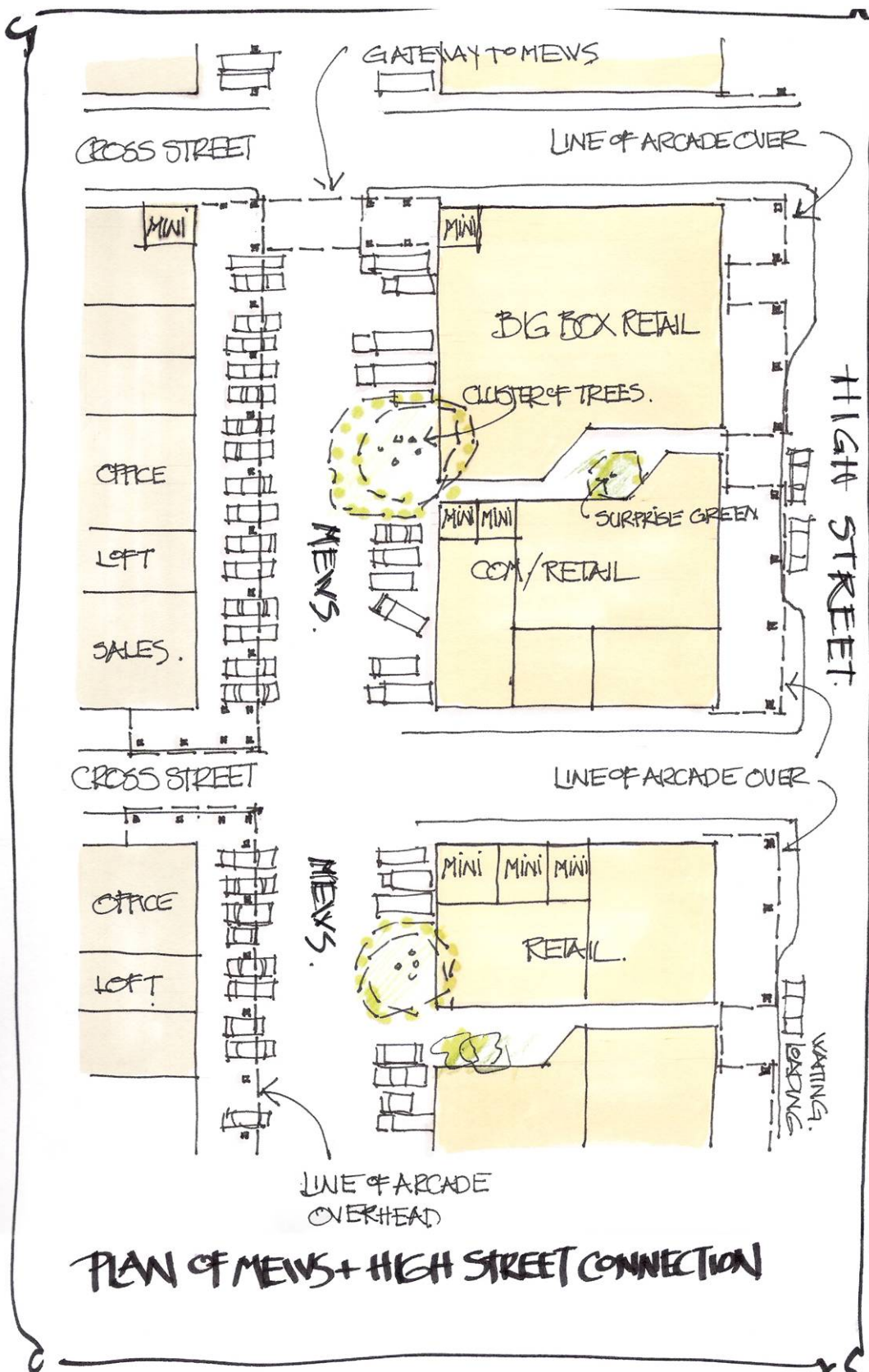


Figure 4-7:
The range of different connections between the high street and the mews would create a diversity of public spaces. The cross streets would provide access to both cars and pedestrians, while the narrower pedestrian links would offer a more intimate experience in which one could encounter a green open space and stop for a break. This pedestrian environment would foster a diversity of civic activity accessible to all.

Different types of on-street parking combined with clusters of trees would add to the variety and vitality of the streetscape.

Building plans able to host a variety of uses would allow for a variety of services and economic opportunities, including big box retail, smaller retail, offices and lofts, and even "mini spaces" for emerging businesses.

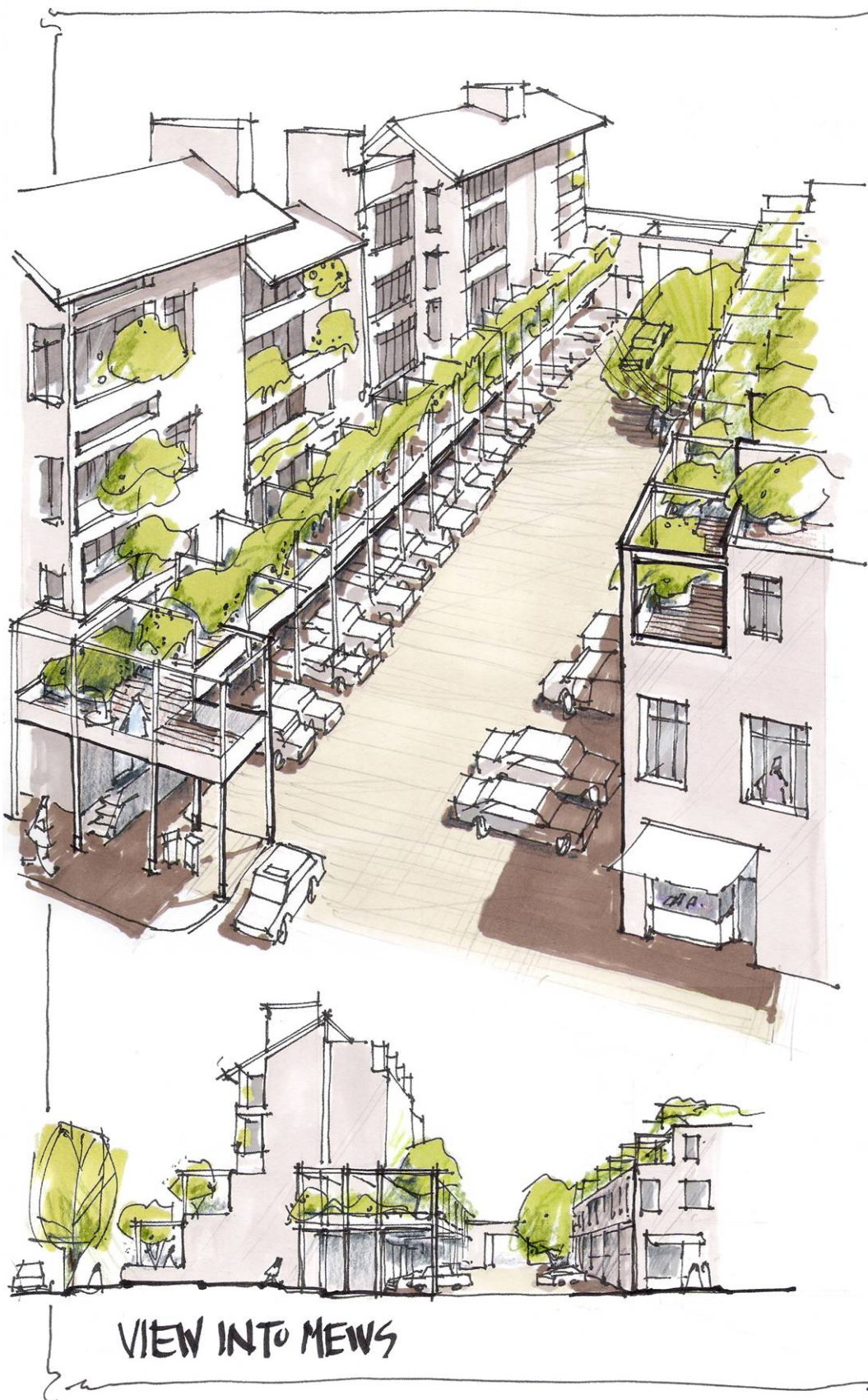


Figure 4-8:
Taller pitched roof buildings and those with lower green roofs would come together to form the mews. Delimited by gateways and with distinct paving to differentiate them from streets, the mews would provide safe traffic calmed areas, with on-street parking and many "eyes on the street."

The mews would become a distinct feature of the Town Centre. Unlike alleys, the mews would be a community-shared backyard that would contribute to a sense of community. The intimate, calm space would be ideal for residential units to face onto as an option to the more lively main and high streets.

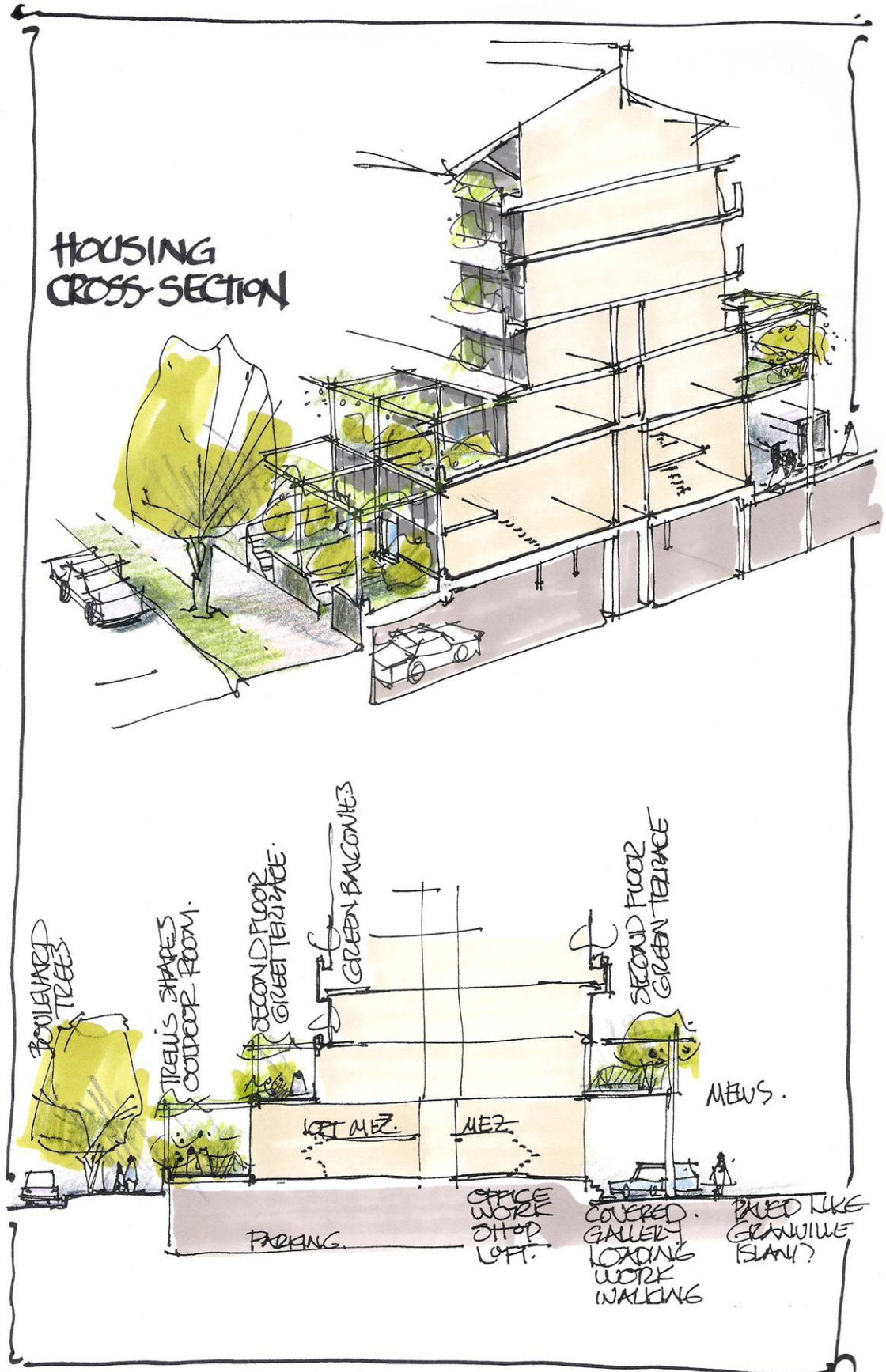
Figure 4-9:

A closer look at one of the imagined building forms reveals a variety of units and housing types within it. This would offer housing options to meet the different needs within the community.

Terraced front gardens in these higher density buildings would scale down their height and assure a human scale to the streetscape.

Underground parking would reduce the need for large parking areas and car-dominated landscapes.

Density, combined with greenery - in the form of boulevard trees, outdoor rooms, green terraces, and green balconies - would create a more inviting and attractive urban environment.



V. Conclusion

Urban design has profound implications in generating quality and sense of place. This qualitative investigation of a potential urban transformation in the Lynn Valley Town Centre is based on a series of urban design strategies explained separately and then brought together to create a preliminary iteration of one vision for the transformation of the Town Centre today. It illustrates how the area could be turned into the envisioned “vibrant attractive town centre,”⁶ with a unique character linked to its geographic location. Most importantly, it shows how its *genius loci* or spirit of place could be unveiled. Such transformation would contribute to a *recovery of place*⁷, offering a more attractive and inviting urban environment that celebrates its natural setting. It is one of many possible explorations of how Lynn Valley Town Centre could be much more than what it currently is. This is just one glimpse of some possibilities for the town centre. There are many others that will come from the collaborative exploration provided by the SxD / Lynn Valley Town Center project. This research bulletin is intended to simply begin the conversation on the qualitative possibilities of the site.

Notes

¹ Christian Norberg-Schulz, 1979, *Genius Loci: Towards a Phenomenology of Architecture*, Rizzoli, New York

² All illustrations by Ron Walkey, 2007

³ District of North Vancouver, 1998, *The Lynn Valley Local Plan - Planning Report*, Lynn Valley Community Planning Team, District of North Vancouver, www.district.north-van.bc.ca

⁴ District of North Vancouver, 1998, *The Lynn Valley Local Plan - Planning Report*, Chapter 7, Lynn Valley Community Planning Team, District of North Vancouver, p.43

⁵ Christian Norberg-Schulz, 1979, *Genius Loci: Towards a Phenomenology of Architecture*, Rizzoli, New York

⁶ District of North Vancouver, 1998, *The Lynn Valley Local Plan - Planning Report*, Chapter 2, Lynn Valley Community Planning Team, District of North Vancouver, p.8

⁷ Christian Norberg-Schulz, 1979, *Genius Loci: Towards a Phenomenology of Architecture*, Rizzoli, New York

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