

SEATTLE, *Vancouver*, June 1994

WE WERE AT Ponti, looking down the Lake Washington Ship Canal at the bright blue-and-orange geometry of the Fremont Bridge and reflecting on our respective cities. “Seattle and Vancouver really like each other,” said my companion, an old Seattle acquaintance. It’s true. I’ve yet to meet anyone from Vancouver who doesn’t like going to Seattle. And vice versa. For a minor inconvenience—two and a half hours set to snooze-control—we can inject ourselves down the concrete artery of the I-5 into a kind of parallel dimension: another city the same size, surrounded by the same forests and mountains and water, where the citizens look familiar, speak the same language and share similar customs. But this other city also happens to be entirely different in temperament, as if it were a different gender—and it’s foreign, to boot.

There is no apparent rivalry between the centres, no animosity. Vancouver saves hers for Toronto, while Seattle, surely male, must endure San Francisco’s nervous scorn. “A prim and proper, almost prissy, little city,” the *San Francisco Examiner* called Seattle, “peopled by too many boring Canadians to have any real style.” Vancouver and Seattle consider themselves to be equals, worthy of respect. But each has what it takes for a visit or two: good restaurants, bars, hotels, shiny malls, sport, music, art, outdoor recreation, history, architecture.

We like each other, but there’s a distance, too. We don’t do things together, for instance: joint ventures or cultural exchanges. We eye each other shyly up and down the freeway like a couple of wallflowers who’d like to date but don’t know how. Jonathan Raban, the transplanted British author who now lives in Seattle, noted that his new home had 161 bridges. “Any city so obsessively dedicated to bridge building as this,” he wrote,

“must suffer from a fundamental anxiety about making connections.” How many bridges does Vancouver have?

We like each other, but do we know *why*? Is Seattle merely a bigger shopping mall than Bellingham, something to move up to after every corner of Bellis-Fair has been explored? Is it proximity that motivates our visits? Or novelty: a city where the sports pages are full of basketball in hockey season and there are places like Espresso Dental, with nerve-wracking shots of caffeine for clients going in for that root canal. The definitive Seattle icons—basketball and strange coffee habits and random handgun incidents—are increasingly available in Vancouver.

STILL WE HEAD SOUTH. When I was courting my wife, Seattle was where we went on our first weekend out of town together. I imagine many people from Vancouver have a similar story. It was 1984, and we stayed at the Westin. Because I was editing *Western Living* at the time and was a minor media celebrity, we were given the maximum available upgrade. That meant the presidential suite: half the top floor of one of the cylindrical towers. Hotel staff, perhaps used to an entourage, kept checking the rooms. The decor was all mirrors and chrome, perfect for the Polaroid camera that we had with us but begging the question: which president?

Those were the days that Seattle was being discovered by its own country: America’s Most Livable City. The year previous, it had been profiled in *Esquire* by novelist Alan Furst and described as “a mystical zone of indifference . . . the hideout capital of the country.” But all that was changing. The immigrants were coming: from New York and the Rustbelt and Los Angeles; from Samoa and Laos and Vietnam and Korea. “By the end of the ‘80s,” wrote British author Jonathan Raban in *Hunting Mr Heartbreak*, “Seattle had taken on the dangerous lustre of a promised city . .

. . (it) was the coming place.” Raban then proved his point by moving there himself.

It was getting more and more difficult for Seattle to mind its own business. And minding its own business was a civic tradition. All the attention, while mildly flattering, was making it uncomfortable. People came to Seattle to do their own thing, not be asked awkward questions about their lifestyle on national TV. A little worldly flutter was okay every now and then; you could, in fact, always go up to Vancouver for that. But please, let’s not disturb the inner peace.

Besides, doing its own thing was paying off. Seattle is famous for peering into its own personal abyss. There’s the dark, self-deprecatory humour of its cartoonists—Gary Larson, Lynda Barry. And great microbrewery beer, to pleasurably ease the descent into self. Which necessitates, of course, equally great coffee for ascending—fuel for those annoying moments when one must get up and head out into the world. After achieving this delicate balance, one can commune with the earth, resulting in the nation’s largest consumer co-operative, REI, the model for our own Mountain Equipment Co-op. Then there’s the “g” word, which Seattle hates. Labelled grunge by the outside world, the city’s antifashion styles in rock music (Nirvana, Pearl Jam, Soundgarden) and clothing (baggy, plaid, flannel, torn) have nevertheless been neatly packaged by corporate marketers: New, improved teenage rebellion.

And how about that software? Writing code is the ultimate mind game, a journey into the very guts of the new machine. Much of the complex, invisible, inner workings for the planet’s computers takes shape here and has greatly expanded the city’s industrial base. Boeing is still important, but Seattle is no longer a company town. Nintendo has a huge presence. Microsoft now employs 15,000 employees, with twice as many or more indirectly employed writing software for its operating systems.

Microsoft is everywhere you go these days; Chairman Gates in China, at the antitrust hearings, in his \$35-million, 42,000-square-foot “site sensitive” house. Earlier this year, the city was agog at Gates’s latest high-tech dream: a \$12.6-billion collaboration with Craig McCaw, another Seattle billionaire and creator of the world’s largest cellular phone company, to build the “information skyway,” an 840-satellite global communications network.

This is Thinking Big. The world is knocking on Seattle’s door. Oh, wise city, says the world, so clean, so rich, so smart. What are your secrets? Despite two world’s fairs and the presence of the planet’s largest software and aerospace companies, the question still makes Seattle pause. It fears notoriety and the world stage. Seattle thinks Vancouver is intimidating, for god’s sake. Ask Seattle’s citizens why they like to visit Vancouver and the answer is always something like, Oh, it’s so cosmopolitan, so European, so worldly. Seattle has fallen for our act. But then, many of us have fallen for Vancouver’s act.

I FORMED MY PERSONAL attachment to Seattle over three decades ago. I went with my family to the futuristic 1962 World’s Fair, just a few years after we’d arrived on the West Coast from Calgary. I was 14, a good age to appreciate space needles and monorails. At 14, I was all in favor of the future. Now I’m not so sure. My sense of boyish wonder must have stayed with me over the years, though, because every time I go to Seattle (this is still true after 30 visits and 15 months of living there) I manage to find neat places that I never knew existed.

The other day, for instance, I got up early and went down behind the Museum of History and Industry, where the Montlake Bridge crosses the ship canal to the university. There’s a little trail through the marshlands and tall grasses bordering Union Bay. A series of islands are connected by floating wooden plankways (floating bridges are a Seattle specialty), and

there are plenty of spots to sit and enjoy the water or listen to the red-winged blackbirds. It's peaceful, but not quiet; at your back is another Seattle specialty, a noisy chunk of well-used freeway. There are great trails (and freeways) round most of the city's abundant shorelines.

The next day I wandered along the graceful curves of Lake Washington Boulevard, laid out on the west side of the lake in 1910 by the legendary landscaping Olmsted Brothers, part of a comprehensive urban greenbelt for the city. I marvelled at the natural spaces: the dripping, fern-feathered gullies of Frink and Leschi parks, the old-growth peninsula of Seward Park (like a miniature Stanley Park), the Kubota Japanese gardens. Even more striking was the diversity of the area's neighborhoods—the condo frenzy of Madison Valley, the cliff-edge colonial mansions of Madrona, the waterfront funk of Leschi.

There's no way around it: Seattle has great neighborhoods compared to Vancouver. It's what makes the city so much fun to explore. For every Kerrisdale or Dundarave, Seattle can offer half-a-dozen villages within the larger cityscape. Each will have that self-contained small-town feel, with its own commercial crossroads or main street, its own bars, restaurants, clubs and theatres. North of the ship canal, for instance, where most of my Seattle friends live, is a wonderful variety of suburbs, each with its own community style.

Fremont is currently very hip, with its brick, flatiron buildings and gritty, ex-biker industrial edge. Wallingford, next door, is more yuppified, but still flavored by a working-class past. Ballard, with strong Scandinavian roots and a major maritime presence, has lots of good restaurants and entertainment spots. Further out, the areas around Green Lake—Greenwood, Phinney Ridge, Maple Leaf—are emerging as distinctive neighborhoods. And the "U" district remains as lively as ever.

The inner-city regions like Queen Anne and Capitol Hill, with their dense, young, child-free populations and vivid street life, are livelier still. And a new downtown neighborhood is rising: Belltown, north of the business district, south and east of Seattle Centre. This area used to be seedy; now condos are springing up around the edges and a hot music and club scene flourishes at night.

The more time you spend in Seattle, the deeper you can get. Part of the reason, I think, is that the city has retained far more of its original urban texture than Vancouver. For every fine piece of architecture that Vancouver has deliberately restored, Seattle has restored 20. For every romanesque or art-deco masterpiece that has survived in Vancouver, 50 have survived in Seattle. It's a fine walking town, and not just for park and water views. There's more public art: little surprises like the bronze dance-instruction footprints embedded in Broadway's sidewalks or Doug Hollis's eerie sound sculpture near Sand Point. Even the eastside suburbs, former synonyms for Dullsville, are stirring; instead of strip malls, they're building libraries and preserving historic buildings.

Seattle appreciates its pluses, but it's still an anxious town. Right now it's worrying about the fact that it doesn't have an urban focal point. Various campaigns are afoot—to build a new, central city hall; to move the public library near Westlake Center (a downtown mall with a small plaza that's the closest thing Seattle has to Vancouver's Robson Square); to revitalize the waterfront—all aimed at developing downtown and centralizing crucial metropolitan facilities. Seattle doesn't want to reach urban critical mass the Los Angeles way.

Downtown is heading north. Past Belltown, it will reach water again at the south end of Lake Union, where auto dealers currently spread their wares. This is another slice of Seattle that people are trying to change. Several prominent civic boosters, including Paul Allen, the best known of

the 2,000-plus millionaires that Microsoft has allegedly spawned (he cashed out his stock years ago and bought the Portland Trail Blazers), are lobbying for the creation of a residential/commercial zone to be called the Seattle Commons, after Boston's. The idea is to bring 24-hour life to downtown—to help Seattle find its missing spiritual centre.

Seattle broods about such things. It broods about the homeless, who also run 24-hour shifts downtown. Lately it had been brooding about how to make them disappear with civic ordinances against “aggressive panhandling” and sidewalk obstruction. It broods about its Asian connections—the refugee immigrants from Korea and Indochina having proven unable to transform the city into the kind of Pacific gateway that Vancouver is becoming, courtesy of its affluent, savvy newcomers from Hong Kong. (Seattle is trying currently to become the North American headquarters for APEC, the Pacific equivalent to the European Community.) It broods about simple pleasures, watching professional baseball outdoors (fans want to tear the lid off the Kingdome) and getting outside in general. Must be the weather. Vancouver actually gets more rainfall, but Seattle always seems cloudy.

VANCOUVER AND SEATTLE are young cities, still taking shape, forming identities. Like young people, they try on different masks and facades, and at the first hint of awkwardness, revert to what everyone else is doing. They don't know who they are yet. Their personalities are unfolding.

Vancouver, long a plaything of eastern Canadian interests, has succumbed to the world's flattery and loves to think of herself as world class, when only her location is world class. As a city, Vancouver is quite small and ordinary. Seattle, withdrawn and insular with a truly Scandinavian reticence, is populated with people who are hiding out from the world's falseness. Nevertheless, civic feelings are easily hurt when Seattle is

neglected or ignored. At its cultural grassroots, the city has incredible vitality: theatre, art and music blossom, poets gather and authors pass through. If it's play, it's okay. Just don't ask anyone to get businesslike, bottle that spirit and sell it to the nation.

You'd think Seattle and Vancouver would detest each other, but they each supply a quality that the other needs. They remind each other of some vital knowledge, some part they are always forgetting. Seattle—which, at heart, is not at all parochial—goes to Vancouver to feel sophisticated and stretch its wings, to be reminded of its incipient greatness, its need to expand and connect with the rest of the world and claim its place, not sulk and cut itself off.

Vancouver—which, at heart, is not really very cosmopolitan—goes to Seattle to be reminded of its essential spirit of place, its regionality. Its residents may think they are just going shopping, but they're also getting a rejuvenating hit of basic Pacific Northwestness. In Seattle, they can taste the essence of those qualities that kept them on the coast in the first place, those ingredients that must be nurtured and protected: salt air, fresh foods, rainforest, water, earthy connections, informality, freedom to investigate one's innermost desires.

Seattle and Vancouver are brother and sister, if they are not Adam and Eve. They rose from the same convulsions that brought freedom seekers west and asylum seekers east. They are yin and yang, heart and mind. Attracted to one another, they have not yet achieved intimacy and probably never will, as each reflects the other's unexamined side too intensely to be borne for long. But they are learning from each other, and well they should. For the way the region is growing, one day they will be joined.