

VANCOUVER (UN) DEFINED

Exploring Vancouver's Cultural Personality Disorder

Vancouver culture isn't easy to pin down. On one hand, the city is often defined by hippie stereotypes (think crunchy granola, 'I break for whales' bumper stickers and the legalization of marijuana). On the other, we seem to be struggling to prove we're a major urban metropolis that deserves to be taken seriously. (Consider the abundance of new condos, the hoopla surrounding the 2010 Olympics and the under-construction RAV line.) Neither definition really does the city justice.

Google the words "Vancouver culture" and the top link is an interactive map and guide to the city from the AIGA (a professional organization of designers) Biennial Conference of 2003. Taking that at face value, it would seem that 'culture' is entirely bound up in a city's restaurant, club and event scene. In that regard, we're doing well. We've got the outdoorsy thing covered, and there's plenty to do street side, but frankly, there's got to be more to it. Defining a city's cultural scene by its ability to cater to tourists seems strange somehow.

The Oxford American Dictionary defines culture as "the customs, arts, social institutions, and achievements of a particular nation, people, or other social group" but also as "the attitudes and behavioural characteristics of a particular social group." This is where Vancouver stops making much cohesive sense. I headed to my local Starbucks to get to the bottom of this mystery, but people's responses about what defines Vancouver's culture were all over the board.

"It's totally laid back," said James Prentiss, a twenty-five-year-old guy in a toque and expensive jeans. "Mountains, ocean, beautiful forests.

You can't beat it." Not ten minutes later, a professional-looking woman in a black trench was telling me that Vancouver was all about "the independent art scene." In one day (actually, in one hour) I heard people say Vancouver was everything from "a wannabe Toronto" to "the best city in the world." At least two people called it "God's country," one said it was full of "urban posers" and another called it "a bum-ridden, rain-soaked mess." So who's right?

In a way, they all are. According to Tourism Vancouver's official website (www.tourismvancouver.com <<http://www.tourismvancouver.com>>), "Vancouver's cultural scene has something for all tastes." That cliché may be a bit hard to swallow and is likely repeated by tourist organizations touting every city in the world, but in Vancouver's case, it may actually be true.

If you're into the slick urban thing, Yaletown calls; if you're a skibum, the mountains are literally minutes away. The city features an abundance of living-arrangement possibilities and distinct neighbourhoods. We've got University culture covered (and largely contained up at UBC), fashionista-worthy shopping (Chanel doesn't have stores just anywhere, you know), and yes, the Downtown East Side, which, despite its troubles, is a major drug-culture tourist destination for those in the chemical know. Oh, and we have hockey, too. You might say Vancouver displays a marked instability in self-image, which is often said to be an indication of a borderline personality disorder. Put in another way, the city is a sort of tasting menu, with plenty to choose from.

Having a little bit of every-



thing has its downside, of course. Tasting menus are fun, but portions are often frustratingly small. Vancouver can be like that, in part because compared to New York, London, and other urban meccas of the world, we're relatively tiny. (The City of Vancouver website estimates that there are only 560,000 people living in the city proper.) That said, being a cultural generalist also means the city is full of possibility. There's plenty of room for

emerging specialties. (And yes, that's my last analogy, I promise.)

In the end, Vancouver's scene, vibe and residents are completely different, depending on who, when and what you ask. We're weird that way. Luckily, our strangely contradictory, somewhat shambolic cultural personality may well be what makes this city great. It's hard to say.

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