
Those who merely read the title of Mark Lowes’ new book may think they’ve heard it all before. A powerful coalition of pro-business politicians and the downtown business community embarks on yet another spectacular urban redevelopment project (usually at public expense). These urban elites argue that the development—insert “sports stadium,” “concert hall,” or “festival mall” here—will help the city project a “world-class” image of urban vitality. Those who dare to oppose the proposed development are quickly overrun by the pro-business establishment’s vast economic clout.

To be sure, there are good reasons for this repetition in the literature on urban development politics. The unequal distribution of economic and political resources in the local political scene is real. Most of the time, deep-pocketed, well-connected downtown business leaders indeed have their way in city hall. Except that sometimes they don’t. And this is the urgent message that Indy Dreams and Urban Nightmares brings to critical communication scholars and local community activists. In this, his latest book, Lowes details the successful struggle waged by community activists to derail a proposal that would have turned a local park into the permanent site for the Molson Indy Vancouver (MIV), an internationally televised motorsport spectacular. In examining the political discourses employed by both the MIV and the local opponents of the proposal, and in his cogent opposition to deterministic models that overstate the ability of capital to secure what it wants, whenever it wants it, Lowes’ Indy Dreams makes an important contribution to critical communication literature.

Lowes’ case study begins with a rupture in the normal workings of elite Vancouver’s promotional machine. For years, the Molson Indy Vancouver followed a racecourse carved out of city streets on the north side of False Creek (adjacent to downtown). However, beginning in 1997, new upscale housing development around the inlet forced the MIV to begin a search for a new home within the city limits. Just weeks later, MIV announced its preferred alternative: Hastings Park, the largest park on the east side of Vancouver, and long home to the Pacific National Exhibition (PNE) fairgrounds.

MIV may have been betting that the more working- and middle-class environs of East Vancouver would lack the political will to resist. In this they were mistaken. During the previous 15 years, the residents of Hastings/Sunrise had devoted themselves to an extended public planning process and had emerged with a “restoration” plan for Hastings Park. This plan, ironically enough, promised to phase out commercial activities such as the PNE in favour of what Lowes calls more “passive” uses of urban greenspace (including picnicking and nature hikes to impressive lookout points). After spending countless hours on the de-commercialization of Hastings Park, local activists were not about to allow MIV to redevelop the park to suit the needs of a 200-mph racecourse, with the attendant grandstands and corporate-sponsored luxury tents now de rigueur at such events. To this end, local activists quickly embarked on a vigorous three-month struggle to prevent the city from relocating the race to Hastings Park.

Details of the ups and downs of this political confrontation occupy the majority of the book. Beginning with a discussion of the role of “lifestyle consumption” practices in the city-building plans of contemporary urban elites (chapter 1), Lowes examines the history of Hastings Park (chapter 2) before moving on to the perspectives, motives, and tactics of MIV and their neighbourhood opponents (chapters 3 and 4). A concluding chapter positions the Vancouver case as part of a more fundamental process through which competing social groups each attempt to imprint their particular image of a “world-class city” on the urban form itself.
Regarding his methodological and theoretical approach, Lowes is quite clear about his intentions, cautioning readers that *Indy Dreams* is “not a book about other books.” He then delivers on this promise by constructing a narrative that stays close to the data of the case. Drawing his inspiration from the grounded theory tradition of Glaser & Strauss (1967), Lowes prefers to focus his energies on describing and analyzing the discursive worldviews and strategic actions of the two political coalitions. For this reason, when Lowes indeed turns to theory—including a terrific analysis of competing theories of urban gentrification (chapter 1) and an enlightening application of Thompson’s (1990) definition of ideology in the context of urban land use (chapter 5)—he does so primarily to ground the case and explain the actions of his consultants, rather than to build upon an ongoing theoretical dialogue.

Lowes’ decision to focus on building the case study pays off by producing a “thick description” that foregrounds the voices of his consultants and brings the reader into the front lines of the struggle. In particular, his detailed discussions of the political arguments advanced by both sides of the debate will contribute to the ongoing task of cross-case comparison. For example, comparing the arguments and tactics of MIV supporters to those of other civic elites promoting other redevelopment plans across the world will undoubtedly yield some interesting insights into how transnational economic pressures shape contemporary urban politics. In addition, Lowes’ ability to capture these discourses and strategies in highly readable prose makes this book a good choice for graduate or undergraduate seminars on urban politics and political communication. Students will be engaged by the task of applying course readings on urban and social theory to Lowes’ case study.

I’m mindful that all research involves making choices. For this reason, no single work, even one as rich and detailed as this, can exhaust the analysis of any particular scene or event, and different authors will invariably focus on different elements of the case. Along these lines, I did finish the book wanting to learn more about the connections between the Hastings Park “restoration plan” and the changing class character of adjacent neighbourhoods. The activists’ preference for more contemplative uses of parkland (versus Coney Island–style entertainment) likely reflects what Bourdieu (1998) would call their class *habitus*, and is most likely related to the gradual gentrification of that part of East Vancouver. Also, I would have loved to read more about how the dispute was processed within the corridors of city hall. What downtown business organizations supported MIV’s plan to move to Hastings Park, and how did they intervene in the debate? And what explains why even the pro-business ruling party in Vancouver (the NPA) was, in the end, unwilling to entertain the idea of a Hastings Park location? Delving into such questions would indeed take the researcher further away from the public arguments of participants, but in my view would pay off by adding some texture and context to the political analysis.

Still, these are quibbles. In the end, *Indy Dreams* stands as an important and timely contribution to the literature on contemporary urban political discourse. Most of all, it offers a lesson for activists and scholars conditioned to expect that the “roving calculus” of capital inevitably shapes urban development in its own image (Harvey, 1985). Although the pressure to present a vital “urban image” to the international marketplace indeed makes the task of opposing the redevelopment plans of civic elites more difficult, local resistance to the imperatives of global promotion and interurban competition is by no means futile.

**References**


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