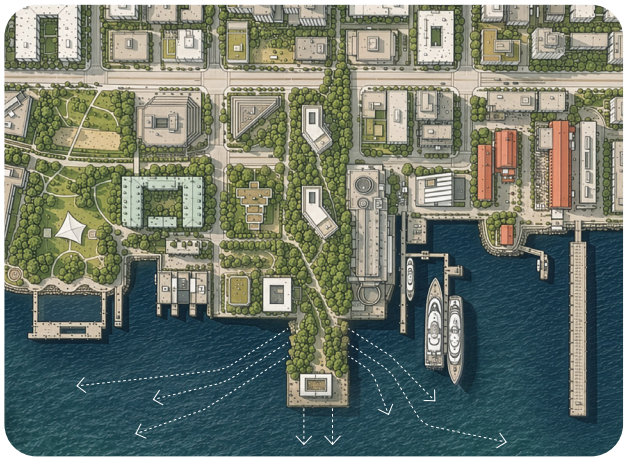
CONNECTING MOVEMENT, PLACE & VALUE

How the ICBC lands could help redefine transit-led city-making in British Columbia



A vision for how strategic public waterfront land can enhance an existing destination, support a vibrant live–work–play community and generate long-term public value.





Architecture and planning firm Farrells has developed an illustrative design study for the future of the former ICBC waterfront site in North Vancouver, using the site as a case study to explore how strategically located public land could become a catalyst for a new model of city-making—one that integrates transit, homes, workplaces, public space and waterfront infrastructure within a unified urban framework.

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Existing Plan - Lower Lonsdale

UNIQUE CONTEXT & OPPORTUNITY

Few locations combine regional transit, an established waterfront and major redevelopment potential within a single publicly owned site. At a time of rising infrastructure costs and housing demand, the ICBC lands raise a broader question: can strategic public land play a greater role in Canada's next generation of city-building?

Drawing on Farrells' experience delivering integrated transit-oriented development across Asia and Europe, the vision explores how transport, land use and public realm can work together to create lasting public value — including housing, civic facilities, First Nations partnership, ecological benefits, improved mobility and reinvestment for public benefit. It is not a fixed masterplan, but a catalyst for discussion about how public land can support housing, infrastructure and economic value together.

"Public land represents one of the most powerful yet underutilised tools available to governments. When combined with strategic infrastructure investment and coordinated planning, it can help deliver the next generation of transit, public realm and civic infrastructure while creating great places for people."
— Gavin Erasmus, Farrells

Following the Ministry of Transportation and Transit's acquisition of the property in June 2024, ICBC is expected to relocate by May 2027, creating a rare opportunity to reimagine one of British Columbia's most strategically located public waterfront sites before its next chapter is defined.

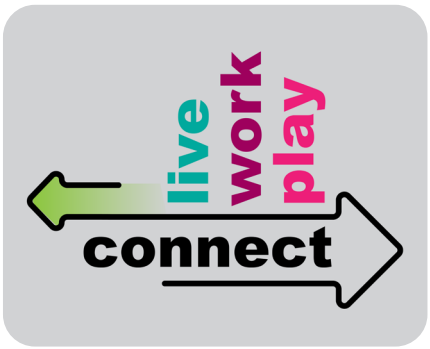
Although the transport interchange beneath the site serves thousands of passengers each day, the upper levels have remained occupied by ICBC offices since opening in 1980, limiting public access and activity. As a result, this strategically located waterfront site has remained largely disconnected from public life despite its regional connectivity and views across the Burrard Inlet.

Its forthcoming vacancy presents an opportunity to rethink not simply what is built on the site, but the role it plays within the city. Rather than remaining a place of arrival and departure, it could evolve into a vibrant mixed-use waterfront district that reconnects movement, landscape and everyday urban life while strengthening the Lower Lonsdale waterfront as one continuous destination. The Shipyards, Lonsdale Quay Market and Polygon Gallery have helped establish Lonsdale Quay as one of Metro Vancouver's most successful waterfront destinations, attracting residents and visitors throughout the year. The regeneration of this area demonstrates how thoughtful renewal can preserve local character while creating exceptional public spaces when supported by year-round events and cultural programming. Yet immediately to the west, Waterfront Park remains comparatively disconnected despite occupying one of North Vancouver's few publicly accessible, non-industrial waterfronts.

Today, the SeaBus terminal and bus exchange function primarily as transport infrastructure, while the ICBC offices create a significant physical and visual barrier between Waterfront Park and Lonsdale Quay. Redevelopment presents an opportunity to transform these adjacent but disconnected places into a single, integrated waterfront district—where mobility, public realm and mixed-use urban life reinforce one another.


SeaBus - Lonsdale Quay to Downtown


The Existing ICBC Office Building & Bus Exchange



COORDINATED PLANNING VALUE

Major public sites present a rare opportunity to coordinate planning, infrastructure and development. The challenge is not simply how to fund growth, but how to organise it to deliver greater long-term public benefit.

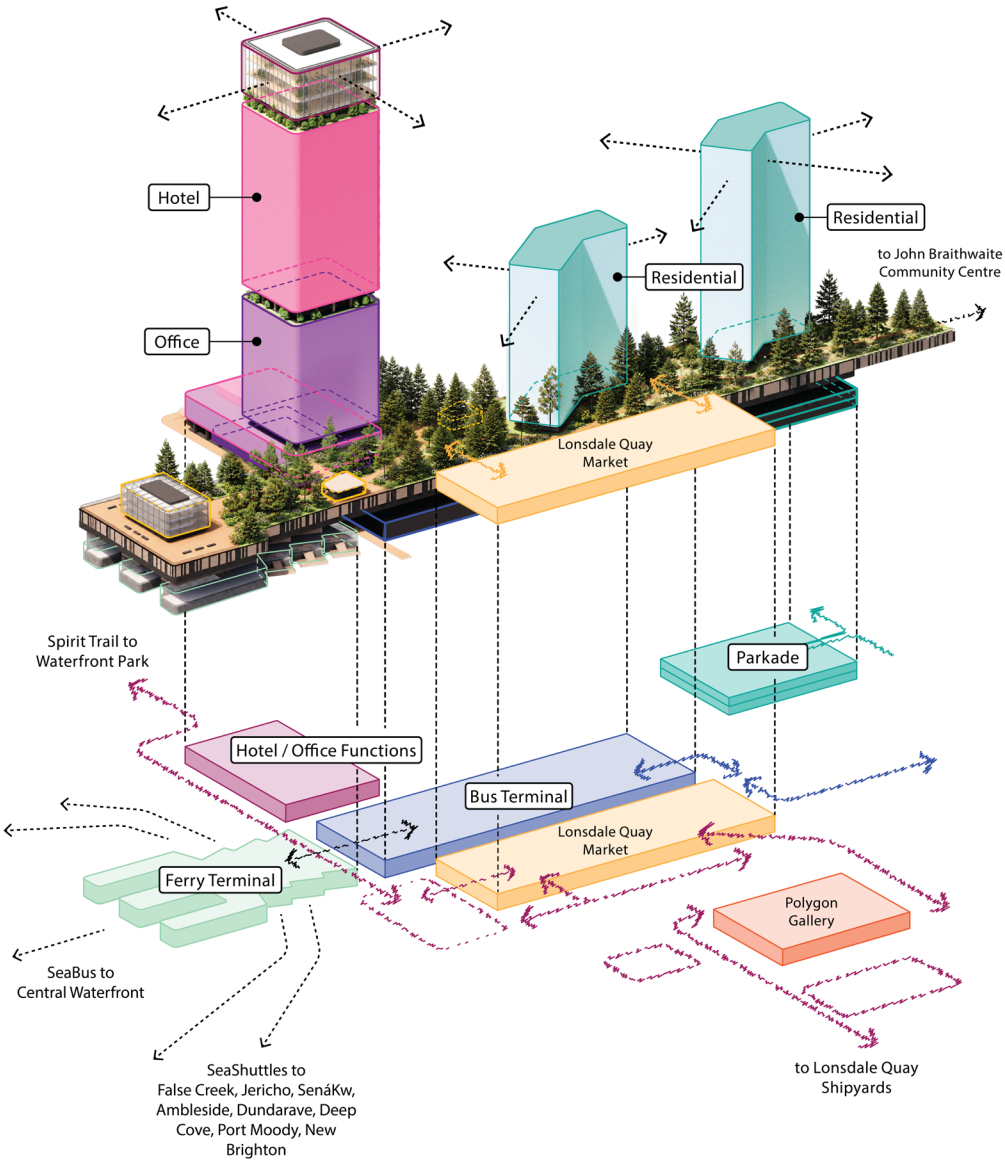
Despite progress in district-scale planning in British Columbia, transport, infrastructure, land ownership and development are still often managed through separate agencies and investment programs. Significant opportunities remain to better integrate development with transport infrastructure. Around several new SkyTrain stations, land above or adjacent to station entrances remains underutilised despite being among the region's most accessible and valuable real estate. Better coordination of transport investment, land ownership and development could unlock greater public value.

Encouragingly, this approach is beginning to emerge. TransLink's new Real Estate Development Program, including its first partnership with PCI Developments at Broadway–Arbutus, represents an important shift towards using transit land to generate long-term value for reinvestment in the network. Earlier projects such as King Edward Station also demonstrate the potential to integrate development directly with transit infrastructure. The opportunity now is to apply this thinking more systematically across the network.

British Columbia relies heavily on development charges and contributions to help fund the infrastructure required for growth. While important, these mechanisms depend on development proceeding and can become less effective when market conditions weaken—while long-term infrastructure needs remain.

Rather than focusing solely on how the costs of growth are shared, the greater opportunity is to create more value through better planning, not simply capture more from development.

International experience suggests that planning transport, infrastructure and development together can generate stronger economic, social and fiscal outcomes. By reducing uncertainty, coordinated planning gives governments and developers greater confidence to invest, and communities a clearer understanding of how places will evolve. Where strategic public land and transport infrastructure coincide, some of the value created may be retained or reinvested in the transport, public realm and civic infrastructure needed to support growth.



Internationally, many successful urban regeneration projects align transport, development and investment within a shared long-term framework. Delivery models vary—from development corporations such as Waterfront Toronto and London's Old Oak and Park Royal Development Corporation to transport agencies such as Hong Kong's MTR—but the principle is consistent: coordinated planning, governance and investment create greater certainty, reduce risk and unlock greater long-term public value.

"Establishing a coherent framework from the outset does more than reduce planning and economic uncertainty. It creates a stronger foundation for meaningful engagement with local communities, stakeholders and First Nations, enabling Indigenous knowledge and shared aspirations to help shape the long-term vision before it is translated into individual development projects."
—Matthew Donkersley, Farrells

British Columbia is already moving in this direction through PlanningTogetherBC. The next opportunity is to apply these principles to strategically located public land around major transport infrastructure, where integrated governance, investment and delivery could unlock greater public value.

REIMAGINING WATER MOBILITY

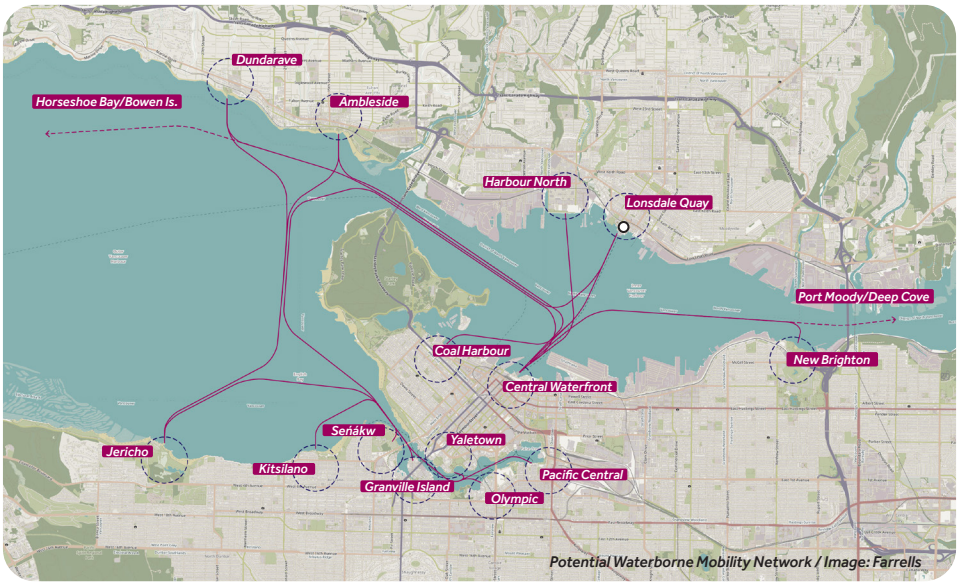
Cities and transport have always evolved together. The most successful urban centres are built around well-connected places where homes, jobs, services and public life can be reached efficiently. As Canadian cities grow, mobility is about more than moving people—it underpins housing, productivity, emissions reduction and liveability.

BUILDING ON EXISTING TRANSPORT

The most sustainable places to accommodate growth are those where high-quality transport infrastructure already exists. Few locations on the North Shore are better positioned than Lonsdale Quay, where the SeaBus terminal and major bus exchange already provide the foundation for one of Metro Vancouver's best-connected urban centres. The ICBC lands therefore represent more than a redevelopment opportunity—they offer the chance to build upon an existing transport hub and demonstrate how mobility can become the catalyst for a vibrant mixed-use waterfront district.

THE HARBOUR AS INFRASTRUCTURE

Metro Vancouver's opportunities to expand cross-harbour transport remain limited. New road and rail crossings would require substantial investment,



Potential Waterborne Mobility Network / Image: Farrells


Second Narrows Bridge Traffic / Nick Procaylo



Electric Hydrofoil Shuttle Ferries / Candela

long delivery times and significant embodied carbon. While future improvements to the Second Narrows corridor may ultimately increase road and rail capacity, projects of this scale can often take decades to plan and deliver. In the meantime, Burrard Inlet itself remains an underutilised transport corridor. Rather than viewing the harbour as a barrier, it can become part of the regional transport network, complementing future bridge and rapid transit investment with flexible, lower-cost water mobility.

"Unlike bridges or rail corridors, water transit can expand incrementally, allowing capacity to grow in step with demand rather than requiring decades of upfront investment. It presents a complementary lower carbon option that can also be delivered at a fraction of the capital cost and in significantly shorter timeframes."
—Matthew Donkersley, Farrells

A NEW GENERATION OF TRANSIT

The SeaBus already provides a fast and direct cross-harbour public transport connection, linking the North Shore and Downtown Vancouver in just twelve minutes. Yet despite almost fifty years

of operation, its core route has remained largely unchanged even as Metro Vancouver has continued to grow.

Advances in electric propulsion are expanding the potential for smaller passenger ferries to operate efficiently and flexibly. Around the world, cities are complementing larger ferry services with smaller vessels offering higher frequencies, lower terminal requirements and incremental expansion as demand grows. Vancouver's geography is well suited to exploring this approach, potentially connecting Lonsdale Quay, Waterfront Station, False Creek, Jericho, Ambleside and Port Moody through electric ferries. Many of these destinations were once linked by ferry, offering an opportunity to reimagine that legacy for the twenty-first century.

THE QUALITY OF PLACE

Great waterfronts are more than collections of buildings. They are places where movement, landscape, architecture and everyday life come together to create memorable urban experiences. People experience cities as a continuous sequence of spaces rather than individual development sites, yet planning and design are often fragmented by site boundaries and delivery processes. Strategic public sites create a rare opportunity to reconnect those experiences and design the city as a coherent whole.

"The future of the North Shore isn't about creating a new destination, it's about unlocking the extraordinary waterfront we already have, connecting Lonsdale Quay Market, The Shipyards and Waterfront Park into one seamless, waterfront experience."

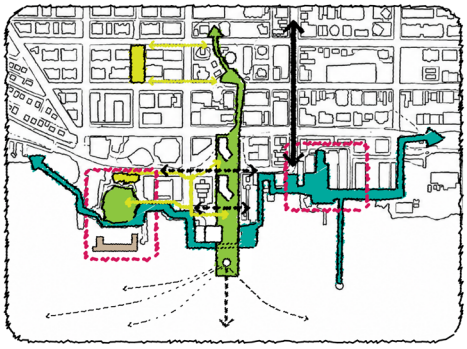
— Pablo Leppe, Farrells

COMPLETE THE WATERFRONT

The vision seeks to complete the waterfront by reconnecting Waterfront Park, Lonsdale Quay Market and the Shipyards into a single, continuous public realm. New pedestrian connections and active frontages would transform the ICBC lands from a place of transition into one of arrival, gathering and everyday civic life. The opportunity here is to strengthen the destination that already exists. Better upper-level connections to Lonsdale Quay Market, for instance, could increase activity, footfall and commercial value, expanding the active public realm while reinforcing the market's role as a key destination of the North Shore waterfront.



The Forest Deck - Community Park + Pavilions above Bus/Ferry Exchange



THE FOREST DECK

At the heart of the vision is the Forest Deck—an elevated public landscape that extends the waterfront across the transport interchange, allowing movement, landscape and urban life to coexist rather than compete. More than simply a park, it becomes a new civic address where people arriving by SeaBus, ferry or on foot step directly into a landscape animated by cafés, restaurants, community activity and generous public space. The landscape could celebrate British Columbia's coastal ecology through native planting and biodiversity, while the architecture showcases the province's leadership in hybrid mass timber construction.

A NEW WATERFRONT DISTRICT

The objective is not density for its own sake, but to use it strategically to create better public spaces, stronger transport, more complete communities and greater long-term public value. The Forest Deck provides the foundation for a vibrant mixed-use waterfront district where homes, workplaces, hospitality, culture and transport come together as a single urban destination. An expanded bus interchange and new ferry connections would put the North Shore and the wider region within easy reach, allowing people to move seamlessly between home, work and leisure while reinforcing the waterfront's role as a regional gateway. A balanced mix of residential, office, hotel, retail and civic uses would sustain activity throughout the day and evening, support local businesses, increase natural surveillance and create a safe, animated public realm.

Concentrating development within carefully planned footprints can retain more of the ground plane for parks, civic spaces and an accessible waterfront while providing the homes, workplaces and amenities needed to sustain a major urban centre. Height, setbacks and overall intensity would need to be balanced against public realm quality, views, daylight, wind and local context. Residents would also become long-term custodians of place, reinforcing the neighbourhood's vitality over time. Shared terraces, gardens, courtyards and other semi-public spaces would remain important to making higher-density living attractive and enduring.

Few sites in Metro Vancouver combine regional transit, strategic public ownership and a waterfront location of this significance. Many of the ingredients for transformational city-making are already in place. The opportunity is not simply to redevelop a prominent site, but to complete the North Shore waterfront while demonstrating how transport, landscape and mixed-use development can create a richer civic destination.

BEYOND THE ICBC SITE

British Columbia faces the dual challenge of accommodating urban growth while renewing and expanding infrastructure within constrained public finances. Strategically located public land offers a rare opportunity to address both together. Early illustrative testing suggests that, at densities appropriate for a major regional transport hub, development value could make a meaningful contribution towards transport infrastructure and public realm, with the scale of potential reinvestment subject to detailed commercial, infrastructure and market analysis.

International precedent demonstrates how strategically managed development can help support wider civic infrastructure. Farrells' experience includes **Hong Kong's Kowloon Station,** where development value formed part of the MTR's Rail + Property model; **Shanghai Shipyard**, which transformed an industrial site into a major waterfront destination; and **London's Charing Cross Station**, where the then-pioneering development above a railway terminus contributed to the regeneration of the north bank of the Thames.



Artistic Vision - Integrated Development and a Connected Waterfront

Rather than prescribing a fixed masterplan, a vision such as this establishes a long-term framework that can evolve over time. Delivery would require phasing, engagement with communities, First Nations and stakeholders, and coordination between the Province, City of North Vancouver, TransLink, infrastructure providers and private-sector partners. Public ownership could enable long-term stewardship while selected development parcels are brought forward progressively, with value potentially reinvested in transport, public realm and civic infrastructure, with the delivery model calibrated through detailed commercial and governance testing.

While the ICBC lands represent a unique opportunity, the wider proposition extends across British Columbia. International precedent shows that successful transit-led growth is not simply about enabling greater density, but coordinating area planning, infrastructure investment, development potential and value-capture strategies within a long-term framework. Strategically located public land can therefore be treated not simply as a development parcel, but as a long-term city-building asset—aligning mobility, infrastructure, public realm and investment before individual projects are delivered. The ICBC lands offer an opportunity to establish a leading precedent for this approach in both British Columbia and Canada.

"The principles explored here are not theoretical. Farrells' international work demonstrates how integrating transport, development and public realm can unlock the value of strategic public land while creating vibrant, connected places. The ICBC lands offer an opportunity to apply these principles and help unlock a new era of water-based mobility across Metro Vancouver."

—Stefan Krummeck, Farrells

FARRELLS

Farrells are internationally recognised architect planners. We have designed award-winning buildings and masterplans throughout the world for over half a century. Our specialism is high quality, mixed-use urban complexes, often integrating visionary urban design with optimised transport solutions. We are responsive, imaginative and skilled in design and have a passion for environmental sustainability, using resources wisely and creating resilient communities.

We believe that architecture and building design should always be informed by the context and 'place'. We work collaboratively and our designers engage with the evolution, layering and everyday use of a place. The architecture grows organically, carefully considered processes, from the big picture through detailed design and construction, always responding to the needs of existing and new communities as well as our clients.

"The Place is the Client" – Farrells has a proud legacy of self-initiated thought leadership projects, conducting research and proposing solutions to the most pressing issues faced by urbanism.

Please visit **www.farrells.com** for more information.
Contact - Matthew.Donkersley@farrells.com

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