THE ROLE OF OFFICE LOCATION IN REGIONAL TOWN CENTRE PLANNING AND METROPOLITAN MULTINUCLEATION: THE CASE OF VANCOUVER

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Introduction

While the last two decades have seen a substantial research output addressing office location issues from an interregional or intermetropolitan perspective, there has been relatively little work published on office sector trends (and their implications for public policy) within the metropolitan region [11].

The literature offers a rich selection of empirical studies associated with the specialized role of “quaternary” office activities in the Central Business District (CBD) and central city [47; 27; 28; 30; 20; 21; 22; 23; 8]. The studies address, for example, the specialized functions of the core, the complexities of core office linkages, and, latterly, the possible future decline in the CBD as the principal locus for higher-order service functions [17]. Still within the urban core, but outside the CBD proper, Damesick [9; 10] has provided useful contributions to our knowledge of policy-oriented office questions.

At the regional level, analysts have concentrated on the implications of office growth for interregional employment and regional policy, focusing in the main on problems associated with overconcentration of office development and office activity in “core”
region locations within the national space, and the resultant unfavourable consequences for "peripheral" regions and areas in terms of employment generation, spatial allocation of investment, capital and incomes, and spin-off activity generated by the "office multiplier" [42; 2; 4].

Moreover, there has been a pronounced jurisdictional focus of policy-oriented studies on the United Kingdom and western and northwestern Europe, due in part to the early expansion of the office sector in a number of large cities and also as a consequence of a comparatively long experience of public sector policies oriented wholly or in part toward office and other service sector activities. Major exceptions include New York, the highest order American service centre, and, in this country, Toronto, where a substantial output of policy-oriented research and the establishment of office adian metropolitan jurisdictions.

This comparative neglect of research on office activity at the regional level in North America is perhaps surprising, given the role of office location and development in:

- the increasing specialization of the central city [29; 18];
- the apparent threat posed to the continued vitality of the CBD by the dynamics of capital intensification, telecommunications innovation, and resultant office decentralization [17];
- the hiving of offices from the central city to the regional periphery, following a pattern in some ways analogous to the dispersal of other of Christaller's "central place" functions: manufacturing, retail and wholesale trade, and so forth;
- the establishment of office and other service activities as a key growth sector for inner and outer suburban authorities [12];
- the recent changes in regional structure, manifested by the spatial diffusion of industry and commerce, and the apparent multinucleation of metropolitan areas.

In addition, office-type occupations have led employment growth in Canada nationally over the last decade. Among the major occupational groups, Clerical and Related Occupations exhibited the greatest absolute increase (about 800,000) during 1971-1981, while Managerial, Administrative and Related Occupations expanded by 119 percent over the same period, second only to (the very much smaller) Social Science and Related category [46]. However, while the literature on office location is steadily grow-

ing, it remains small in comparison with that pertaining to industrial location.

In speculating why there are relatively so few Canadian studies on office location determinants, George, Dipchand and Storey [19] offer two possible explanations: 1) manufacturing is still considered by many as the sole economic base; and 2) the distribution of office activity is generally considered to be determined by the distribution of manufacturing and of population. Moreover, unlike the experience in a number of western European nations (notably the U.K., France, and the Netherlands), office location has never been established as a major instrument of regional policy in Canada, where the major focus has tended to be primary resource development and secondary manufacturing. In short, there is something of a lag in the appreciation of the growing importance of office employment as a factor in shaping the urban environment in Canada [1]. A further contribution to the comparative neglect of office location studies is the practical problem of data availability. Employment data in Canada, as well as in the U.S., are generally reported by Standard Industrial Classification Codes, and such categories do not distinguish office employment within the extractive, manufacturing or service industries. This lack of suitable data adds significantly to the problems of analyzing office location patterns and determinants [15].

In contrast, the comparable availability of manufacturing employment data is a major reason for the relative abundance of studies of industrial location patterns. In recent years these studies have largely focused on the phenomenon of industrial decentralization [36; 37; 16; 44]. Such studies contribute greatly to our understanding of the spatial dynamics of industrial employment and their impact on the growth of suburban municipalities vis-à-vis the central city. To date, however, the interrelationships between office location patterns and the decentralization of urban populations have been relatively unexplored.

In this paper, office location and urban multinucleation are considered in a regional planning context through an examination of public sector efforts to decentralize office employment as a means of promoting designated population subcentres within the metropolitan region of Vancouver, British Columbia. As discussed below, it is the explicit policy of the regional planning administration of metropolitan Vancouver to restructure the population distribution away from the central city toward designated suburban municipalities. Encouragement of offices to locate in these satellite centres is held to be the key to the success of the development of these centres. The purpose of the paper is to examine critically this strategy and to suggest some of the barriers to its success.
The 1960s were characterized by unprecedented population growth in metropolitan Vancouver. The region experienced an annual growth rate of 2.5 percent during the decade, which far outstripped the national average. At the time, it was predicted that population and employment growth would continue at equivalent or even higher rates during the 1970s and 1980s. This led to serious concern about the implications for the quality of life or “livability” of the metropolitan region, and to an exploration of possible remedial policies or institutional approaches to managing future growth in the interests of preserving and enhancing the overall livability of Greater Vancouver. In the mid 1970s, the Greater Vancouver Regional District (GVRD), the agency of regional planning and administration in metropolitan Vancouver, set forth a five-element strategy for managing growth in the region. In addition to setting targets for residential growth, promoting a spatial balance between jobs and population, calling for an efficient transportation system, and advocating the protection of open space, the GVRD’s planning strategy, the Livable Region 1976-1986 [33], explicitly encouraged the development of a multinucleated metropolitan structure, through the establishment of designated regional town centres (RTCs):

Developing Regional Town Centres in suburban locations will bring jobs, shopping and cultural opportunities closer to where people live. Decentralization to these centres of some of the office growth that otherwise will locate in downtown Vancouver will greatly reduce transportation problems. The aim, therefore, is to create lively and diverse urban places which are attractive alternatives to downtown... [33:10].

The establishment of regional town centres within metropolitan Vancouver is, in the view of the GVRD, an integral and indispensable element of the official regional plan to preserve and promote a “livable” urban environment. Office development and office activity were from the outset assigned a critical role in the fostering of the regional town centres. Each RTC was envisaged to attain a million square feet of office space and to serve a population of 100,000-150,000. It was judged that at this scale each RTC would become self-sustaining in development and could then continue “to attract considerable office employment and activities without special incentives or promotion” [33]. Given that employment growth in the central City of Vancouver resulted to a large extent from the expansion of office activity, it was clear that the locational propensity of future office development in metropolitan Vancouver would be seen as critical to the success of the Livable Region Plan (LRP) generally, and to the fostering of the regional town centres in particular.

Downtown Vancouver may well be the key to the success of the Livable Region Programme as it relates to the creation of regional town centres, for unless these centres can attract a significant proportion of the total employment growth in the future they may not attain viability [38:19].

In the “planned” stage of RTC development, commercial offices were to be the central or principal land use, with all other uses subordinate or secondary. This approach was based on the notion that commercial offices would provide a more appropriate functional and physical core for the RTCs than other uses, and would more effectively enhance the status of the RTCs as dominant service nodes within their respective spatial sectors of the metropolitan region.

Four regional town centres for the metropolitan region have been designated to date: Burnaby-Metrotown and New Westminster in the inner suburbs, and Coquitlam Centre and Whalley-Guildford (Surrey) in the outer suburbs. It was envisaged that all four RTCs would be at least “started” by 1986, with the two inner suburban RTCs preferably achieving the basic target threshold for office floorspace by the early 1980s and in theory providing a catalyst for the outer suburban RTCs. The policy vehicle was to be an “Action Program”, incorporating joint planning, land assembly and the “reservation” of appropriate areas for development, and a coordinated development management process [26:11].

Aspects of Change in GVRD Office Development: Toward A Preliminary Analysis

A comprehensive analysis and evaluation of the progress of the Livable Region Plan’s town centre program will presumably require detailed, survey-oriented research, pending the completion of the first phase of the program in 1986. However, some observations may currently be made, focusing on the relative performance of the regional town centres vis-à-vis the existing CBD and the non-RTC suburban municipalities, and on the broad pattern of office development that appears to be emerging within the region, in the context of the stated policy preference for fostering a multinucleated regional structure.
The Changing Pattern of Office-Development in Greater Vancouver and the RTC Program

Vancouver's office base remains relatively centralized, with about three-quarters of the region's office stock located in the central city and approximately half of the total inventory situated in the downtown area. Despite the continued strong performance of the downtown, data for the last decade reveal an increasing pattern of suburbanization. As can be seen from Table 1, however, office growth over the 1971-1982 period has not been concentrated in those municipalities containing designated RTC's.

Table 1
DISTRIBUTION OF OFFICE SPACE BETWEEN VANCOUVER AND THE INNER SUBURBS, 1971-1982

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Vancouver</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Downtown Peninsula</td>
<td>65.2</td>
<td>63.1</td>
<td>59.6</td>
<td>56.4</td>
<td>56.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other Areas</td>
<td>21.8</td>
<td>21.6</td>
<td>21.3</td>
<td>22.8</td>
<td>22.7</td>
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<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>87.0</td>
<td>84.7</td>
<td>80.9</td>
<td>79.2</td>
<td>79.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Inner Suburbs</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Burnaby</td>
<td>2.4</td>
<td>3.8</td>
<td>7.3</td>
<td>7.8</td>
<td>7.8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>New Westminster</td>
<td>5.7</td>
<td>4.9</td>
<td>4.2</td>
<td>4.2</td>
<td>4.2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>North Vancouver City</td>
<td>2.0</td>
<td>2.4</td>
<td>2.2</td>
<td>2.6</td>
<td>2.7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>North Vancouver District</td>
<td>0.9</td>
<td>1.0</td>
<td>0.8</td>
<td>0.8</td>
<td>0.8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>West Vancouver</td>
<td>1.2</td>
<td>1.7</td>
<td>1.5</td>
<td>1.6</td>
<td>1.4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Richmond</td>
<td>0.9</td>
<td>1.5</td>
<td>3.1</td>
<td>3.7</td>
<td>4.1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>13.1</td>
<td>15.3</td>
<td>19.1</td>
<td>20.7</td>
<td>21.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>TOTAL</td>
<td>100.1</td>
<td>100.0</td>
<td>100.0</td>
<td>99.9</td>
<td>100.0</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: Real Estate Board of Vancouver [31].

Further empirical evidence of office development out of phase with the RTC program can be found in Table 2, which shows increases in office and other commercial floorspace in Greater Vancouver, by municipality, for 1977 and 1982. During this period the City of Vancouver experienced a higher rate of growth of office floorspace (36.4%) than did the inner suburban municipalities as a whole (33.2%), which suggests a trend directly counter to the intent of the Livable Region Plan. Moreover, of the inner suburban municipalities, those exhibiting the greatest increase over the five years following the publication of the LRP, Richmond and North Vancouver City, did not enjoy the status of designated RTCs.
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>OFFICE (%)</th>
<th>RETAIL (%)</th>
<th>SERVICE (%)</th>
<th>SHOPPING CENTRE (%)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Vancouver</td>
<td>15,070 20,559 36.4</td>
<td>11,346 12,542 10.5</td>
<td>10,480 10,479 0.0</td>
<td>758 756 0.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Inner Suburbs</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Burnaby</td>
<td>1,704 2,270 33.2</td>
<td>1,551 2,077 33.9</td>
<td>931 1,277 37.2</td>
<td>1,247 1,265 1.4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>New Westminster</td>
<td>1,247 1,519 21.8</td>
<td>1,623 1,770 9.1</td>
<td>593 615 3.7</td>
<td>62 196 216.1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>North Van. City</td>
<td>619 866 39.9</td>
<td>589 718 21.9</td>
<td>296 335 13.2</td>
<td>465 465 0.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>North Van Dist</td>
<td>167 205 22.8</td>
<td>470 528 12.3</td>
<td>391 426 9.0</td>
<td>263 263 0.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>West Vancouver</td>
<td>388 463 19.3</td>
<td>233 263 13.7</td>
<td>573 613 7.0</td>
<td>637 917 44.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Richmond</td>
<td>866 1,323 52.8</td>
<td>582 762 30.9</td>
<td>767 890 16.0</td>
<td>1,416 1,549 9.4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>4,991 6,646 33.2</td>
<td>5,048 6,120 21.2</td>
<td>3,551 4,156 17.0</td>
<td>4,090 4,665 13.8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Outer Suburbs</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Surrey</td>
<td>519 1,436 176.7</td>
<td>1,937 2,699 39.3</td>
<td>791 1,068 35.0</td>
<td>1,535 2,755 79.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Coquitlam</td>
<td>133 276 107.5</td>
<td>327 553 69.1</td>
<td>267 461 72.7</td>
<td>443 1,376 210.6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Port Coquitlam</td>
<td>72 168 133.3</td>
<td>194 259 33.5</td>
<td>113 172 52.2</td>
<td>93 198 112.9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Port Moody</td>
<td>54 68 25.9</td>
<td>105 126 20.0</td>
<td>87 111 27.6</td>
<td>14 14 0.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Delta</td>
<td>112 219 95.5</td>
<td>283 401 41.7</td>
<td>370 425 14.9</td>
<td>744 1,094 47.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>White Rock</td>
<td>108 114 5.6</td>
<td>219 243 11.0</td>
<td>99 116 17.2</td>
<td>56 55 -1.8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>998 2,281 128.6</td>
<td>3,065 4,281 39.7</td>
<td>1,727 2,353 36.2</td>
<td>2,885 5,492 90.4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>TOTAL</td>
<td>21,059 29,486 40.0</td>
<td>19,459 22,943 17.9</td>
<td>15,759 16,988 7.8</td>
<td>7,733 10,905 41.0</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Some additional observations can be derived from data produced by a recent survey [35] of 729 businesses in 59 major suburban office buildings in the metropolitan region. First, convenience of access to clients and business associates was cited as a locational determinant by only about one-fifth of the office firms surveyed; this is significantly lower than responses commonly obtained in surveys of central city offices, and is consistent with the thesis that suburban offices are characterized by less dense interbusiness networks [43]. Second, the relatively high number of suburban office firms citing proximity to the downtown as a locational determinant suggests a continuing reliance on the specialized services and concentrated market of the regional core. In fact, more firms cited “proximity to the downtown” as a locational factor than “proximity to clients and business associates”, which supports the view that the central city, despite some evidence of office decentralization, still exerts considerable dominance within the metropolitan region.

Finally, an examination of floorspace data [32] shows “... a lack of concentration of suburban commercial development in the defined regional town centres of Burnaby-Metrotown, Downtown New Westminster, Coquitlam Centre and Whalley-Guildford [in Surrey].” The proportion of total suburban commercial development contained in the LRP-designated centres remained almost unchanged in the decade 1970-1979. This result appears to cast doubt on the ability of these centres to attract larger shares of the suburban growth in commercial activity and, by implication, upon the likelihood of achieving a multicusculated regional structure along the lines called for in the Livable Region Plan. In fact, as Figure 1 indicates, commercial development in the Vancouver suburbs (i.e., that portion of metropolitan Vancouver outside the City proper) increased faster than in the RTCs alone; moreover, this disparity actually increased in the years immediately subsequent to the publication of the Livable Region Plan in 1975. A perhaps equally significant fact, revealed by the GVRD survey data, is that not only did commercial growth rates among the RTCs lag behind those of the other suburbs collectively but commercial floorspace continued to increase at faster rates in the Vancouver downtown than in the RTCs (see Figure 2).

In sum, what the data appear to suggest is that office suburbanization is occurring on a significant scale among the Vancouver suburbs as a whole but not in consonance with the spatial preferences expressed in the GVRD’s Livable Region Plan.
the suburbs as a whole or the downtown of Vancouver City. Any such generalizations are largely inhibited by a lack of primary data relating to factors underlying intrametropolitan office location behaviour in the region, the problems of separating or appropriately weighting multiple factors and variables that may have a significant role in determining the spatial distribution of office development, and, of course, significant differences in the characteristics of the four designated RTCs (in terms of location relative to the CBD, population size and growth rate, maturity of development, industrial structure, and so on). However, there may be offered at this point several factors which provide a partial explanation of the apparent failure of the RTCs to develop as major suburban office centres.

**Misperception of the Evolving Regional Economy**

The concept of the four regional town centres, while basically sound in planning principle, may well have been somewhat premature. It would appear that the model employed is more relevant in the trends and patterns observed in comparatively advanced or mature regional economies, where the central city has already begun to experience absolute or relative decline (vis-à-vis the suburbs or urban hinterland), where services are the dominant growth force in the region as a whole, where the manufacturing base is in a state of attenuation, and where large-scale office decentralization is occurring largely through market forces.

By way of contrast with some of these larger, older urban centres, Vancouver is still a very young metropolitan region in which the central city “office boom” is a relatively recent phenomenon; in which there has recently been a large-scale, centrifugal shift in the pattern of industrial (manufacturing, warehousing, and so forth) location; and in which the principal growth engines of the more dynamic suburban municipalities are industrial development and population-serving activities. Perhaps most important, office decentralization in Vancouver may be retarded by the relatively insignificant scale of agglomeration diseconomies (such as congestion) which may have impelled a centrifugal movement of offices in older, larger cities such as London and New York. Indeed, the growth in the downtown core of amenities that are valued by the senior managers and professionals [39], which has paralleled the growth of offices in Vancouver [6], may be seen as a significant centralizing factor.

**Miscalculation of the Behaviour of the Office Markets**

The strength of centripetal market forces may have been substantially underestimated; specifically, the tendency for many of the “quaternary” sector activities to exhibit a high degree of locational centrality. There may also have been an overestimation of the extent to which office developers employ regional planning guidelines (which have been given rather ambiguous expression in the development plans of several of the suburban municipalities) as a statement of “preferred” locations for office development.

While it is true that both the federal government and the regional authorities are attempting to support the RTC program by establishing large office operations in the RTCs, it is at least problematic to what extent private office developers are prepared to see such projects as “development leaders”. The business sector
may be only too aware that, in public sector locational decision-making, social or community objectives can take precedence over economic factors, which is proper for public authorities but which is seen as a luxury by private developers, without some offsetting package of incentives.

We can trace a parallel between office location trends in Greater Vancouver and those observed in other metropolitan regions. In the case of Toronto, Gad has noted that since the mid-1970s, "decentralization has subsided and even some reconcentration has occurred" [18:8]; while, in another analysis of office location in Toronto, Code [7:27] has suggested that:

... as the opportunities to occupy suburban space have increased ... there has been a countervailing decrease in willingness to move to the suburbs. This would be consistent with the view that, with the kind of activities in the core of Toronto, progressively higher inducements would be required in order to relocate core functions.

Daniels [11] has recorded a similar pattern for Seattle (a city roughly comparable to Vancouver in size, age and office type functions), where the "... office economy remains highly centralized, intraurban migration has been limited, and suburban centres must rely heavily on in situ growth of indigenous office enterprises" [11:58].

Planners have expressed concern that much of the office space developed in suburban municipalities has located outside the Regional Town Centres. However, a significant proportion of new suburban office space has been comprised of office operations ancillary to industrial plants, which are often situated within or adjacent to the plants themselves (for reasons of economy and convenience), and are unlikely in most cases to be candidates for RTC locations.

Failure to Designate Locational Priorities in the RTC Program

If a chief objective of the program was to establish major suburban office centres with some significant degree of independence from the city and characterized by substantial concentration of office space as well as by a significant amount of higher-order office operations, then it might have been advantageous to designate priority centres within the context of the RTCs (e.g., New Westminster and Burnaby-Metrotown as “major growth” centres); Surrey-Guildford and Coquitlam as “medium growth” centres); and to support this more vigorously at the regional and municipal level. In other words, the idea of attempting to foster four major suburban office centres simultaneously might have been too ambitious; designation of priorities could have provided a clearer focus, both for public and private investment.

At the same time, it must be acknowledged that the question of designating suburban office centres on a priority basis may be especially difficult in a region characterized by an administratively-fragmented structure, with relatively powerful municipal authorities and a relatively weak upper-tier strategic planning authority; i.e., the GVRD. Anecdotal evidence supports a view that the need to achieve a consensus-based strategy among the sixteen municipalities of the region may well have hindered the establishment of a prioritized office location strategy, as well as inhibiting a more responsive adjustment to changing market conditions in the region. This situation has a significant precedent in the case of London, where a weak upper-tier strategic planning authority, the Greater London Council, has experienced great difficulty in gaining acceptance among the 32 local authorities within its purview for a comprehensive office development strategy [14].

Ineffective Policy Approaches on the Part of Municipal Authorities

In some instances at least, there has been a failure of suburban municipalities to identify clearly priority locations for RTC development. In Surrey, for example, the municipality has now prepared a development plan featuring no fewer than five subcentres, with the objective of facilitating more accessible retail service centres for the resident population of this (admittedly very large) municipality, apparently superseding the notion of establishing a single, clearly-delineated regional commercial office centre. Moreover, inappropriate zoning approaches appear to have contributed to confusion among developers (e.g., by permitting large shopping centres and other non-office uses in prime RTC locations) as to the specific development objectives of the RTC program.

Some observers, in addition, have criticized the somewhat passive approach adopted by certain of the suburban municipalities containing RTCs. The successful development of Croydon (the major outer suburban office centre for Greater London), where the local authority embarked on an active and forward-looking office development program incorporating land-assembly, receptive development control procedures, and so forth, as early as the mid-1950s, provides an excellent example of what may be achieved [5; 13].

Competition from Non-Designated Suburban Centres

A substantial proportion of suburban office development has in recent years located within suburban centres not designated as Regional Town Centres. This is particularly so in the case of Richmond (which has the substantial advantages of proximity to the City of Vancouver, a dynamic industrial base, a growing local residential population, and proximity to the airport) and, to some
extent, North Vancouver, which has recently experienced the location of two large Crown corporations with a combined floor-space in excess of 400,000 square feet. In the case of the former, the significance of an international airport as a major locational determinant for suburban offices has been documented in metropolitan Toronto by Bennet [3], providing a parallel experience in another Canadian city.

_Inadequate Central City/RTC Linkages_

The lack of really satisfactory CBD-RTC linkages in Greater Vancouver may have acted as a constraint on suburban office development. For example, Ley [40], in a study of the relocation of British Columbia Telephone from the downtown to Burnaby-Metrotown, ascertained a relatively high degree of dissatisfaction among professional and managerial staff, many of whom expressed a sense of isolation from the rich variety of contacts in the CBD.

This constraint may to a degree be offset over the long run by the completion of the region’s Light Rail Transit system project, connecting Burnaby-Metrotown and New Westminster to the downtown by means of a fixed-rail system. In the short term, however, the LRT system may actually act as a centralizing factor, both by increasing commuter capacity into the CBD and by facilitating the penetration of regional markets by downtown office firms.

_Summary and Conclusions_

In response to unprecedented population growth in the 1960s, the Greater Vancouver Regional District created the Livable Region Plan. A prime objective of this program is the establishment of a multinucleated population structure effected through the designation of four designated Regional Town Centres. From the outset of the program, office development and activity were conceived to play a critical role in the evolution of these suburban centres.

Since the RTCs are not scheduled to have acquired definitive form prior to 1986, a preliminary analysis is to date all that can be undertaken. Given this limitation, current empirical evidence suggests that insofar as office-led multinucleation is occurring, it is not strongly consonant with the spatial preferences of the Regional Town Centre program.

The failure of the RTCs to develop more rapidly as the major suburban office and population subcentres may reasonably be attributed both to circumstances specific to the Greater Vancouver region and to more general factors observed in other jurisdictions. With respect to the former, our analysis suggests that the envisaged progress of the RTCs as incipient office centres has been constrained by inadequate RTC-CBD transportation linkages; by a lack of clear policy direction within certain suburban municipalities; and by an insistence on multiple, unprioritized RTCs in an era of slackening growth and in the face of competition from alternative suburban centres more favoured by the market.

An identification of other perceived factors may serve to place the Vancouver experience within a broader context. First, it seems apparent that the framers of the office strategy seriously overestimated not only the potential for market-impelled office decentralization, but also the degree of locational influence to be derived from an essentially consultative regional plan. As noted in the analyses of office decentralization undertaken by Gad, Code _et al._, Daniels, and others, the centrifugal movement of office activity is not inevitably a continuous process but, rather, appears to occur in waves or cycles; moreover, in the most recent period, a slackening of decentralization — and even some measure of re-concentration — appears to be taking place in regions with relatively strong, high amenity, specialized CBDs (e.g., Toronto and Seattle).

Secondly, the Greater Vancouver experience suggests that the nature of _in situ_ suburban office development and activity may militate against multinucleation _per se_. A large proportion of suburban activity is either ancillary to manufacturing and industry or residentiary services dispersed throughout the suburban and exurban space. Again, when viewed against the backdrop of the documented experience of other metropolitan regions, it appears that the quantity of commercial office activity attracted to incipient office centres may be limited relative to total suburban office development.

Finally, we would suggest that the GVRD’s problems in establishing a multinucleated system of suburban office functions demonstrates once more (as in London and other regions) the inherent difficulty of promoting such a structure within a necessarily consensual decision-making framework. Particularly in cases where a trade-off must be made in choosing between centres best suited from a planning or social perspective and those perhaps embodying greater market potential, a strong and active consensus, backed up by the necessary resources and inter-municipal commitment, is needed if success is to be achieved.
References