

A digital village waits to be born in False Creek

Are we visionary enough to see our economic future is in silicon chips, not wood chips?

Miro Cernetig

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The old warehouses are mostly silent now, vast caverns echoing back to an age when real men had grease under their fingernails, workers bent steel into tractors and regulated their lives by the sounding of the factory whistle.

Such was life in the mostly forgotten Finning Tractor factory. It sits atop 71/2 hectares of prime industrial land aside the downtown's train tracks, with the Vancouver skyline just blocks away.

Walk this parcel of land and you are cast back in time, to what might be called Vancouver's industrial age, when it was sawmills and factories, wharves and train yards that defined this city's economy.

It's also easy to see why this land, the old mud-flats on the edge of False Creek, would have developers salivating.

It's one of the last open tracts of real estate near the city's core. It cries out for renewal.

But there's an alternate future other than just another condo development unfolding on the old Finning site.



CREDIT: Ian Lindsay, Vancouver Sun
Paul Lee (above), Electronic Arts vice-president and industry co-chair of the Premier's Technology Council. UBC law professor Dennis Pavlich (below).



CREDIT: Ian Lindsay

A few visionaries are thinking that this old factory should be the site of a digital village, a fusion of the digital arts, high-tech research and the city's rapidly growing video gaming industry and research into sustainable development.

Vancouver Sun Files / Paul Lee (above), Electronic Arts vice-president and industry co-chair of the Premier's Technology Council. UBC law professor Dennis Pavlich (below).

"We should be thinking along the lines of building something like an MIT, something that makes Vancouver the centre for the gaming industry and high-tech research," says Paul Lee, the former president of the Worldwide Studios of gaming giant Electronic Arts.

He is now senior adviser to EA's CEO. "We've got the talent here; we should be building on it. The time is right."

That is what seems to be starting to happen, though regrettably in baby steps rather than the visionary leap Vancouver ought to be making to hold its place in an industry that now rivals Hollywood and could offer Vancouver the high-paying jobs its next generation needs. This year, the video gaming industry -- more accurately called interactive entertainment -- was worth about \$37.5 billion globally. By 2010, that number will be closer to \$47 billion. As the province's forest industry declines, this is one of the areas that could be a source of economic growth. The future is silicon chips, not wood chips.

One of the people who gets this -- and realizes that Vancouver will have to move quickly to secure its position as a centre for the digital economy -- is Dennis Pavlich. He's a professor from the UBC law school, a man who would seem more at home in a dusty law library than a computer gaming centre. But like his city, he's been reinventing himself for the digital future.

Pavlich is founding president of the Great Northern Way Campus, a unique academic centre because it has brought together four institutions -- UBC, Simon Fraser University, the B.C. Institute of Technology and the Emily Carr Institute -- into one area. He is now trying to galvanize support within the private and public sectors to build the digital village, which he envisions as an urban hub that will include advanced academic programs in the digital arts as well as sustainability research, high-tech companies, green-condo developments to help pay for it all and new rapid-transit stations connecting it to the city. All of it, he envisions, will be "off the energy grid," a real-life model of the green technology that should also be part of Vancouver's model.

We can thank the old tractor maker for making it possible for such a vision. In 2000, with no prospect of tractor-making coming back to the city, the company donated the six city blocks between Main Street and Clark Drive to the four institutions. Their presidents soon saw it as an "academic anchor and industry hub for the City's rapidly growing high-technology precinct."

Part of Pavlich's job is to try to keep that vision alive and generate some excitement about it. On a recent day, sitting over lunch in a downtown hotel, he was talking up his latest idea. He was recently at the Venice Biennale, he said, and had an epiphany as he walked through exhibitions in the old palazzos, full of cutting-edge digital art. Why not convert one of the old

Finning warehouses into a digital-arts exhibition hall, he thought, to carve out a niche for Vancouver in the international art world.

"I thought, 'Wouldn't it be great if we set up a digital arts centre in Vancouver?' " he said. "It's something we could do here. We can't set up a museum and fill it with old masters. We just couldn't afford to set up that sort of museum or cultural centre you see in Europe. But we could make ourselves a world centre for digital art. We could make this our own."

Pavlich went on to suggest that a digital arts centre could then be used by other cultural groups, to experiment virtual arts. Theatre groups or the Vancouver Opera, say, could come to the old tractor factories to experiment with using digital technology to create virtual sets.

"We could even have our own biennale, for the digital arts. This is something that we could start by the Olympics and build on it for years to come. I don't know of any city that is doing it now."

It's a terrific idea, of course. But it's hard not to wonder if despite media enthusiasm, if the rest of us are being plodders in the digital world. Despite the obvious talent base here -- B.C. has about 1,100 digital media companies, employing more than 15,000 people -- we're taking a long time in booting up our digital village.

Case in point. It took almost six years for the B.C. government to pump in \$40.5 million to build the Centre for Digital Media and start up the master of digital media program. The first students in the digital media program only began studies in September. In the digital universe, this is a glacial pace. If we don't speed up, we'll be guaranteed to be left behind.

One of the people who knows that is Peter Ladner, the Vancouver city councillor. He's been a proponent of the digital village for years, noting that Toronto and Montreal have already made large investments. Toronto's MaRS (medical and related sciences) centre is a \$450-million investment in the city's downtown, mixing venture capitalist with high-tech companies and researchers. Both Montreal and Ottawa are doing the same.

More notable is what's happening internationally. Major cities are investing heavily in high-tech hubs, understanding that there needs to be a centralized, critical mass of the academic, research, venture capital and entrepreneurs to be a player in the digital economy. Consider Taiwan, where leaders have created the Neihu Technical Park in Taipei. It is a centre for almost 3,000 business that are adding \$63 billion a year to the country's economy.

"We in Vancouver need to embrace this future, otherwise we won't have the high-paying jobs that we will need," said Ladner. "People here are too complacent, they think we're doing fine. But in reality when it comes to median family income, we're 22nd out of 27 Canadian cities."

What we need, too, is to become more than simply a service-oriented industry. In essence, don't make the early mistakes of the film industry,

which has tended to be focused more on production than an originator of creative material. Ian Verchere, who has been one of the key producers behind the creation of Radical Entertainment's Beavis and Butthead and one of the producers on EA's SSX Tricky, says that Vancouver's headed in the right direction. He has been teaching at the Great Northern Way Campus, as faculty member in the master of digital media program, which he says is far more than a theoretical or strictly technical approach to the industry.

"[It's] not a research degree, rather an applied program intended to deliver talent at the top of the digital value chain --the next generation of creators and producers and entrepreneurs," he says. "In some respects, Vancouver is better known as a location for television and feature film production. The experienced and talented crews and service providers are here in abundance, but are dependent on mainly U.S. productions. The top of the value chain in film and television are the writers, producers and directors that come in from Los Angeles

"Many of the best and most innovative video games and Web applications in the world are created and developed in the city," he adds. "But there is the risk that the independent developers and amazing talent in Vancouver becomes increasingly dependent on service work at the expense of the creation and development of original intellectual properties. It is critical to invest in, grow and nurture the next J.K. Rowling, Steven Spielberg or Shigeru Miyamoto."

Verchere, in fact, has a message for the big money of Howe Street. There's a new road to riches: "We already are a digital hub in Vancouver -- what we need to do is get the venture-capital community understanding that there is 'gold' and 'oil' right under their feet here, to fund wells of ideas and mine stories. The question really is not 'should we be', but 'how can we not?' "

mcernetig@png.canwest.com

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