Indy Dreams in the World Class City



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In today's climate of relentless inter-urban competition for the major public and private investments that contribute to economic growth, spending on image-making and public relations is often perceived to be as important as spending on urban infrastructure and other upgrades. The rationale behind this is that the more a city such as Vancouver can appear "on the same stage," or "in the same league" as New York and Los Angeles, the stronger their chances of growing and prospering will be — or so the civic leaders believe.



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In the broader context of an increasingly global sports entertainment industry and its seamless integration with mass media that reach global audiences, the annual Molson Indy Vancouver (MIV) motor race has become a fixture in a growth strategy whereby Vancouver seeks to project itself as a "world class" city. Sports events like the Indy and sports franchises like the Grizzlies have become surrogates for, and mobilizers of, civic identity, in Vancouver and other North American cities. Indeed, civic officials in both Canada and the United States have apparently bought into the idea that major-league sports teams, international sporting and cultural events, and the "world class" facilities associated with them, help a city to project images of cultural sophistication and economic dynamism.

In media coverage of the Molson Indy, a recurrent theme is that the event puts Vancouver "on the world stage". This representational ambition is also manifest in suggestions that hosting this spectacular international event could make Vancouver "the Monaco of North America, Canada's Monte Carlo." This allusion, of course, trades on the glitz and glamour of Europe's Monaco: with its celebrity Royal Family, its elite hotels and casinos, and its breathtaking Mediterranean landscapes. Monaco and Monte Carlo are signified in popular discourse as a playground for the global rich and famous. Their annual Formula One race, the Monaco Grand Prix, is one of the most anticipated stops on the F-1 circuit, drawing the attention of the world.

Promoters argue that the Molson Indy — showcasing as it does the European and South American stars of elite motor sport racing, in the spectacular harbourfront venue of False Creek — confers upon Vancouver similar connotations of international chic. "The Molson Indy Vancouver has gotten to the point where it's more than just a race. It has become a world-class event," gushed one Tourism Vancouver official. Indeed, the MIV is seen by boosters as a signifier of Vancouver's arrival as a world-class city, providing the city with an occasion to show itself off: "It is Canada's Monte Carlo, pure and simple, a stunning setting where the Coast Range meets the Pacific Ocean." Vancouver's claims here to "Monte Carloness", it might be suggested, reflect both international pretensions, and the perceived importance of cities showcasing themselves as sites of affluent lifestyle pursuits. The latter are visible, in Vancouver, in the concentrations of galleries, designer clothing and accessory boutiques, and gourmet coffee shops and restaurants that saturate the city's downtown and False Creek districts (where the race takes place). Motor racing appeals to affluent audiences, and coverage of the Indy gives Vancouver widespread international exposure. Reporters and television crews from around the globe may spend several days in the city, filing stories on the race and its star personalities, but also conveying the cosmopolitan atmosphere of the city and its varied lifestyle attractions.

So, as a promotional vehicle, the MIV is highly valued by Vancouver's 'new economy' oriented elites. They want the revenues the event itself brings into the civic economy; they also believe it contributes in important ways to Vancouver's image as a world-class tourist destination. The Indy generates a purported $19 million in economic spin-offs (according to Tourism Vancouver and Indy offi-

cials), pumping more than $500,000 into the city's tax base. Vancouverites are also reminded of the value of having Vancouver's scenery appear, even in the background, on television screens in an estimated 100 million homes around the affluent world. For this is a truly international event — no other show in town even dreams about an audience of this size, or this global distribution: not the Grizzlies, not the Canucks, and certainly not the B.C. Lions of the Canadian Football League.

Each year an estimated 160,000 people flood the stands during the Indy's Labour Day weekend run, including 70,000 for the final day. All this helps to create more than a thousand temporary jobs and approximately $2.4 million in contracts for local contractors. Moreover, though there is little hard evidence to support claims that the presence of "world-class" sports has an influence on residential (let alone business) relocation decisions, these events do contribute to the tourist industry, as well as to a cumulative image of a wealthy, globally-oriented city. And it is in terms of these themes that Vancouver's political, business, and other civic boosters make the case that hosting the Molson Indy is a matter of economic and cultural "common sense." Entertainment spectacles are depicted as necessary to gain world recognition and "world class" status for the city.

Now, my objective here is not to dispute these claims, at least not on narrow economic grounds; the MIV does generate a lot of business over the Labour Day weekend, and perhaps has a more general 'imaging' effect that benefits Vancouver's tourism industry. Rather, my criticism is of the "world class city" discourse that surrounds the event, and the fact that it is now very difficult in Vancouver to ask publicly what this means, and to create a public debate about the vision of Vancouver that is promoted here. Certainly there is no public forum where critics of the Molson Indy can make their voices heard and articulate an oppositional discourse. In this regard, I especially want to single out the Vancouver media for their relentless promotion of the event. For example, leading up to the race weekend, both the Province and the Sun, Vancouver's daily newspapers, produce extensive "Special Indy Supplements", each running 30-40 pages. In addition to this pre-event hype, both papers provide exhaustive race coverage, and a great deal of post-event "wrap-up". Local radio stations likewise contribute to the promotional atmosphere by airing 30-second "Eye on Indy" information spots, up to 25 times per day through the eight weeks leading up to the race.

The problem is that nowhere in this volume of media coverage is there a serious (or even half-hearted) engagement with concerns that have been raised repeatedly by Indy critics. Criticism has come from neighborhood residents' associations, from environmental groups, and from anti-poverty activists. Their concerns include things like the noxious air and noise pollution that are inevitable by-products of urban auto racing, the congestion of people and cars that the race weekend annually brings to False Creek, the celebration of car culture in a city endemically affected by smog and traffic jams, and most of all the allocation of public resources to an event aimed at affluent tourists, while public services remain under-funded and poor peoples' needs go unmet. Indeed, what is often obscured in the boosterism surrounding the Indy is the fact that there are voices in Vancouver who have tried to argue that their city would be better served if it invested in affordable and good quality public services, and in locally oriented public spaces such as parks and community recreation centers. But against the promotional clamour of the Vancouver media, such voices have a hard time making themselves heard.

Here I am struck by Andrew Wernick's proposal, in Promotional Culture, that we live amid a "vortex of promotional signs" — an endless circulation of messages and images in which virtually every aspect of social life has become part of a sales pitch. This is especially manifest in the promotional discourse that surrounds the idea of the "world class" city, and in the upmarket goods and events that supposedly confer this status on cities. In a world increasingly permeated by promotional culture, we find that consumer goods and entertainment have become the currency of urban public life. The sports entertainment industry, in particular, has become a site for the promotion of popular commodities and styles, and for the construction of both individual and civic identities. Yet these new sources of identity have, in the process, become ever more closely tied to market forces, and to the creation of meaning through consumption and display. In these discourses of consumption, the "consumer" has replaced the "citizen" as the focal point of urban life and economic strategy. Moreover, in cities like Vancouver, it is the buying public, and in particular that part of the buying public with globally-oriented tastes and interests (and the incomes to support them), which is of paramount concern to those with "world-class" pretensions. Such are Vancouver's Indy dreams. Such is life in the "world class" city. ■

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