

CONSULTANT aims to develop better environment Sheltair's Sebastian Moffatt is building a case that communities can be greener and more livable without costing more to create

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WENDY STUECK - Vancouver -- Sebastian Moffatt doesn't want to flee the city. He just wants to redesign it.

Over the past 15 years, the founder and president of Vancouver-based Sheltair Group Resource Consultants Inc. has been working on systems to transform urban neighbourhoods. By focusing on cost and profit -- as well as things such as storm-water and sewage treatment -- the environmental consultant has been giving a hard edge to what can be flimsy principles, and building a case that communities can be greener and more livable without costing more to build. While it's become fashionable to talk about minimizing environmental impact, Mr. Moffatt argues that urban developments can actually improve on their natural surroundings.

"We don't want to minimize damage -- we want to improve the environment as we develop it," says Mr. Moffatt, 47. "We want to end up with more birds after we develop than we had before, we are going to improve [the number of] salmon in the stream, we are going to set really challenging targets, and we're going to meet them.

"And not only that, we are going to have a more profitable development."

Currently, his seven-member firm is part of a team of consultants, architects and planners working on a community planned for Burnaby Mountain in Burnaby, B.C. The project could eventually put about 4,500 dwellings and 10,000 residents on a wooded, 200-acre site next to Simon Fraser University. The site is one of several projects in the Lower Mainland where planners are taking steps to build communities that use less of the region's scarce resources.

British Columbia's geography and climate have forced governments, especially in this part of the province, to explore more sustainable policies, says Patrick Condon, a professor of landscape architecture at the University of British Columbia. "That's created business opportunities for consultants who can take [guidelines] and apply them to questions in a way that makes sense to developers and consumers," Prof. Condon says. "It doesn't mean that we have to go back to living in trees."

On a typical project, Sheltair may help a client set some guiding principles, and then devise systems to implement, measure and manage these. Prof. Condon points out that many Canadian jurisdictions have sound sustainable development guidelines, or at least principles, on their books. But without large-scale examples to look to for guidance, developers -- and regulators -- prefer to stick with what they know, whether that's garbage collection that makes no provision for composting or recycling, or homes built beyond easy walking range of shops or schools.

As well, sustainable guidelines can put planners in the awkward position of flouting their own municipal regulations, which may, for example, dictate amenities such as curbs and gutters. All these factors mean that proposed sustainable projects can take longer to get under way, or collapse under the weight of competing good intentions. But would-be green and pleasant cities are going ahead.

The Burnaby Mountain project, announced in 1996, is still in the planning stage, but homes and shops should start appearing by 2002. Southeast False Creek, a residential community and park planned for a strip of industrial land near Vancouver's downtown, is still on paper as well, but the city adopted a policy statement on the site last fall after two years of planning. (A report from Sheltair helped the city draft its statement.)

And in Surrey, B.C., planners have approved the East Clayton Neighbourhood Concept Plan, which features plenty of green space, and developments that put shops, schools and transit close to homes and parks. Still, few expect the urban landscape to change dramatically, at least in the short term.

"Now is not the time to convince developers and consumers that they need to have grass on their roof," says Michael Geller, president of Burnaby Mountain Community Corp., the Simon Fraser University subsidiary that is in charge of the new residential development. "Whenever we look at this sort of community, we have to keep reminding ourselves that [change] does not happen overnight."

Mr. Moffatt, however, believes time is short, and so he keeps looking for solutions that will allow people and corporations to enjoy their current activities and lifestyles, but use fewer resources doing it. He puts his own principles to work on his Saltspring Island farm, where he runs a woodlot, has planted thousands of trees and is experimenting with permaculture, which emphasizes multiple use of resources -- trees, for example, can provide shade and wildlife habitat -- and careful stewardship. He's also working on his PhD, and preparing for a fall conference in the Netherlands on sustainable development.

Increasingly, he says, his work crosses disciplines, and focuses on bringing divergent interests, and communities, closer together. "Our challenge is to help each developer and business to do just what they're doing now -- whether that's moving people, or entertaining people, or building things -- but without consuming as much energy and resources.

"That's not just a challenge, that's absolutely required, or we have screwed things up completely."