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[Gaining Ground: in Conversation with Gene Miller](#)

by hans peter meyer

The [Gaining Ground Summit](#) series lands in [Vancouver](#) this October 20-22, 2009. I interviewed one of the visionaries behind this exciting and inspiring confab this summer. An audio version of this interview is published in two parts [here \(part 1\)](#) and [here \(part 2\)](#).

For anyone using Twitter and interested in this conference, please follow [@ReslientCities](#). Please also tag all posts related to the conference as [#GGRC09](#). A lively feed of pre-conference information has already started! The conference can also be found on Facebook by searching "[Gaining Ground Summit](#)."

hpm: Gene, would you tell me a little bit about yourself and how long you've been involved in the Gaining Ground Summit series?

GM: Sure. I come from New York City, but I've lived and worked in Victoria since the very early 70s. For the last four years I've been involved in organizing the Gaining Ground Sustainability Conferences. Our sixth conference, what we're calling Resilient Cities, is coming up in October 20-22, 2009. Three have been held in Victoria previously and two in [Calgary](#). This one will be in Vancouver.

h: What exactly is Gaining Ground?

G: Gaining Ground is the accidental name for the conference series. It was meant to sound notes of hope and optimism in terms of the sustainability agenda as we defined it.

I have pretty much all of my life, certainly all of my professional life, been involved in orchestrating public conversations of one sort or another starting in 1970 in Victoria with the creation of the *Open Space Arts & Culture Centre*, and in 1975 with [Monday Magazine](#). So I feel that the conferences are very much in line with those earlier efforts to conceive and orchestrate public conversations on important themes.

h: So how did you become involved in the sustainability conversation? From what I see and hear, you've become a pretty important person in Victoria, but also in Western Canada in this conversation. How did that happen?

G: Oh, that's generous. I have always had an interest in architecture, [urban planning](#), and urban design. I put those interests to work principally as a development planner in the Victoria area and wound up getting involved professionally in the early days of [Loretto Bay, David Butterfield's](#) big sustainable resort development down in [Baja California](#), in Mexico.

I spent about two years working with David then returned to other aspects of my career back in

Victoria. But I had built a pretty large network by that time, of people who were passionately interested in and involved in [sustainable development](#) and some of its related fields. It was a pretty logical jump for me to seize the opportunity to create a conference series that would bring together all community elements to discuss sustainability and move the sustainability program ahead.

h: When you first started, when you first got involved with Gaining Ground, how would you characterize that conversation, compared to now? What has changed in the time that you have been involved with it?

G: A great deal in a very short time. When I conceived the conferences as I say, a little less than but certainly no more than four years ago, sustainability was a marginal interest. It was a marginal concern driven largely by people who were perceived by the main stream to be tree huggers and hysterics and apocalyptarians who harboured concerns about impacts [sic] on the environment. And in 4 short years – which I think shows amazing and promising take-up – sustainability, as people say these days, has moved mainstream. That seems to me to be a remarkably short time frame and obviously a very promising indicator.

h: You talked earlier about wanting to "sound notes of hope and optimism." Has your intention or message changed in the years that you have been involved in this? I was at Gaining Ground last year in May in Victoria and it was my first exposure to what you've been doing. I came away with this incredible sense that people are doing amazing things out there to address a whole lot of concerns and that's not part of – well, most of what I hear about [climate change](#) is fear stuff – but I came out of Gaining Ground '08 feeling excited and positive. Can you talk a bit about that?

G: I think that as little as four or five years ago, but certainly going back before then, people were sounding notes of warning and notes of alarm and were seen to largely to be coming from the protest end of things. But I believe there was always and undercurrent of people who were professionally engaged or deeply engaged in productive activity either in science or scientific and technical innovation, design, urban planning, and community capacity building, and a whole bunch of other fields or areas of social endeavor. And I think what has happened is that those people have taken on more and more responsibility for articulating and spreading the ideas and the practices of sustainability.

h: The conferences in the past have happened in Victoria. This last, at some point you moved one to Calgary and now you are having this one has moved to Vancouver. Why moving the feast?

G: Well, I think it's possible for a conference-like event to outstay it's welcome. I didn't want to see that happen. So I take a subjective measure of the energy of an event from one year to the next, and I felt that three conferences were enough in Victoria, and two conferences which we completed in Calgary this year was enough. Each of those conferences on its own terms, and in significantly different terms from each other, have been highly successful. I think the Calgary job is done. The Victoria job is done. I sensed that there was an enormous opportunity to convene the very active and very diverse community involved in sustainability practice and promotion in Vancouver.

h: So talk to me a little bit about what the name of this conference, “Resilient Cities,” is that correct? And why Vancouver?

G: The Vancouver conference has a number of themes, one of which is green economic development. This is not the the only theme of the conference, but it is a major theme. I think there’s a line of connection between the public as consumption society and the consumption footprint, and the consumption footprint is what has driven us and the systems of nature to such a state of duress. It’s my belief that all of North America needs a model, probably many models, and it certainly needs a classroom. One of the ideas of this conference is that Vancouver, for a number of years now, has made a name for itself internationally with a branded style of urban planning and urban design which is called [Vancouverism](#), or known as Vancouverism. I felt that of all the places I knew, Vancouver was on the verge of a transformation to a green sustainable city and that sustainability represented Vancouver’s next bounce in that arc that began with its reputation for distinctive urban design and urban planning.

So it seemed to me that Vancouver was a logical place to focus the sustainability conversation. All of my initial inquiries and conversations with people made it clear that everybody felt the time was right for a major event, to bring all parties and all interests into one room so they could engage with each other.

It’s been a fundamental belief of mine for all of the conferences that sustainability isn’t simply the province of sustainability practitioners, or people with narrow or specific expertise, or folks in the academic environment, or in political leadership. I’ve always believed that sustainability, by definition, represented a kind of a whole system transformation or a whole society – or in this case a whole city transformation. So it was very much in my mind, particularly for the Vancouver conference, to work off a model that was used successfully for our previous conferences. To bring all interests together and to assume that out of that might come some very powerful synergies, new partnerships and new collaborations, engaging all interests.

The other thing is that I think that there are upper limits, particularly in this economic climate, to the resources that a city, at a leadership level, can bring to the sustainability agenda, or any other. With the Vancouver conference, even more than with the others, we’re going to make sure that community level interests are full participants in the conference. I think that out of that can come a city governance/community collaboration or partnership that doubles Vancouver (or any city’s) ability to make sustainability progress.

h: Well that’s an ambitious vision.

G: Yes it is. But, sustainability has not only moved mainstream, but in the course of moving mainstream has engaged community interest at a tremendous level. While there are different interests or contiguities that may have their own take on, and own definition of, what sustainability means, it’s all good and it’s all in aid of a good. So, I don’t feel much of a need to differentiate or distinguish, but simply to make sure that these parties and players have an opportunity to interact and to move towards what will be an organic outcome.

h: What kind of response have you had in Vancouver to the idea of the conference?

G: It's been stupendous. Something that we tried on a kind of a practice basis at the last Calgary conference we have been much more ambitious with for the Vancouver conference. So far we've had amazing success. What we've done is to identify a variety of organizations in all fields who endeavor to be conference partners. And you know, conference partnership is a simple relationship, a simple exchange of free registration and an opportunity to promote organizational interests at the conference in return for an active promotional, conference promotional effort. And the partnership program is working stunningly well. The partners that we have attracted, almost fifty in number [by July 2009], represent professional organizations, municipalities, a regional endeavor, authorities, regional and city authorities of all various kinds, NGO's, community associations and organizations, several universities and learning institutions. So it's been an extraordinarily successful initiative, and I think a very timely one.

There is an appetite to make a thing like this successful and to try to be part of something that makes a significant difference. And the timing it appears could not be better because Vancouver this fall will unveil its ten year sustainability plan, as well as it's green economic development strategy. I hope and believe those will be in a significantly finished stage to allow the conference to be the place where the wraps are taken off these two protocols. In any case, the conference will certainly be showcasing them.

h: Very cool. Very cool. So if people want to follow up on this stuff or they want to register for the conference the website is www.gaininggroundsummit.com. Is that right?

G: Absolutely, and I would add to my previous thoughts that I don't know whether... I mean a conference is just a conference. It's, as I say, a two and a half, or with the shoulder events, a three and a half day event or conversation. I think the networking is going to be extraordinary, and if our luck holds and if the trends continue, we will in fact have six hundred or more people at the Vancouver Trade and Convention Centre. They'll be here not just from the mainland, the Lower Mainland, but from Vancouver Island, points east in Canada, the US, and elsewhere. If a conference can be a tipping point, then I hope that Gaining Ground Resilient Cities is that tipping point, and allows Vancouver to make significant progress in its effort to become a green city and to more fully develop it's green economic development strategy.

So I'm hoping that not only community, government, and academic interests are there; I'm hoping that a lot of business interests also make a point of coming to the conference. I think we are on the verge of something big here. The speakers, as you know from visiting the website, are – well, it's a feast. It's just a feast. I know of two books that will be coming out of the conference and we also just heard from the video producers of the [End of Suburbia](#) that featured [Richard Heinberg](#) and [James Kunstler](#). They are coming to the conference to make a video of it, because they are preparing a new video documentary called “Resilient Cities.”

h: Very cool.

G: Absolutely.