

# The Surrogate

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The Surrogate is an investigation into the common casting of British Columbia (BC) as other cities and landscapes in film and television. The project maintains film as a cultural artifact and that cultural artifacts accumulate to inform identities as they become records of both time and place. Readily consumed and easily accessible, film instills subconscious readings of architecture and landscape to its viewers through sophisticated curation and narrative structures. This research engages drawing and propositions of reorientation to imagine scenarios where British Columbia may come to finally play itself.

BC's landscape joins the province's long list of resource exports as the backdrop for Hollywood blockbuster films; under the guise of its malleable architecture and diverse geography, BC plays New York, Seattle, San Francisco, China. To facilitate the market and position itself as *the* attractive filming city, Creative BC runs an online catalogue catering to Hollywood, where industry folk can pick and choose backdrops like ordering towels from Crate & Barrel. This catalogue, called 'A World of Looks',

is conveniently organized into six major categories - 'Towns', 'Forests', 'Mountains', 'Ocean', 'Landscapes', and 'Urban' (Figure 1) - all being sold as contextless sites of topical attraction: this alleyway can 'Double As' the East Coast... or China. The province has become such a successful surrogate it has earned the nickname "Hollywood North"<sup>1</sup>, a title easily believed by the sheer number of filming locations pinned within the region - a quantity far exceeding any other north american filming region.

By offering cheap labor and robust tax incentives, BC has cornered an economy that ironically leaves it culturally invisible: BC provides the raw goods - i.e. filming locations and production labor - only to later import and consume the processed product of finished films and tv programs from Hollywood, California. Void of references to historical, cultural, or ecological significance, locations listed in the catalogue become place-less spaces waiting to be assigned American imaginations through the superficial use of architecture and landscape. Admittedly, BC has not been built for the American

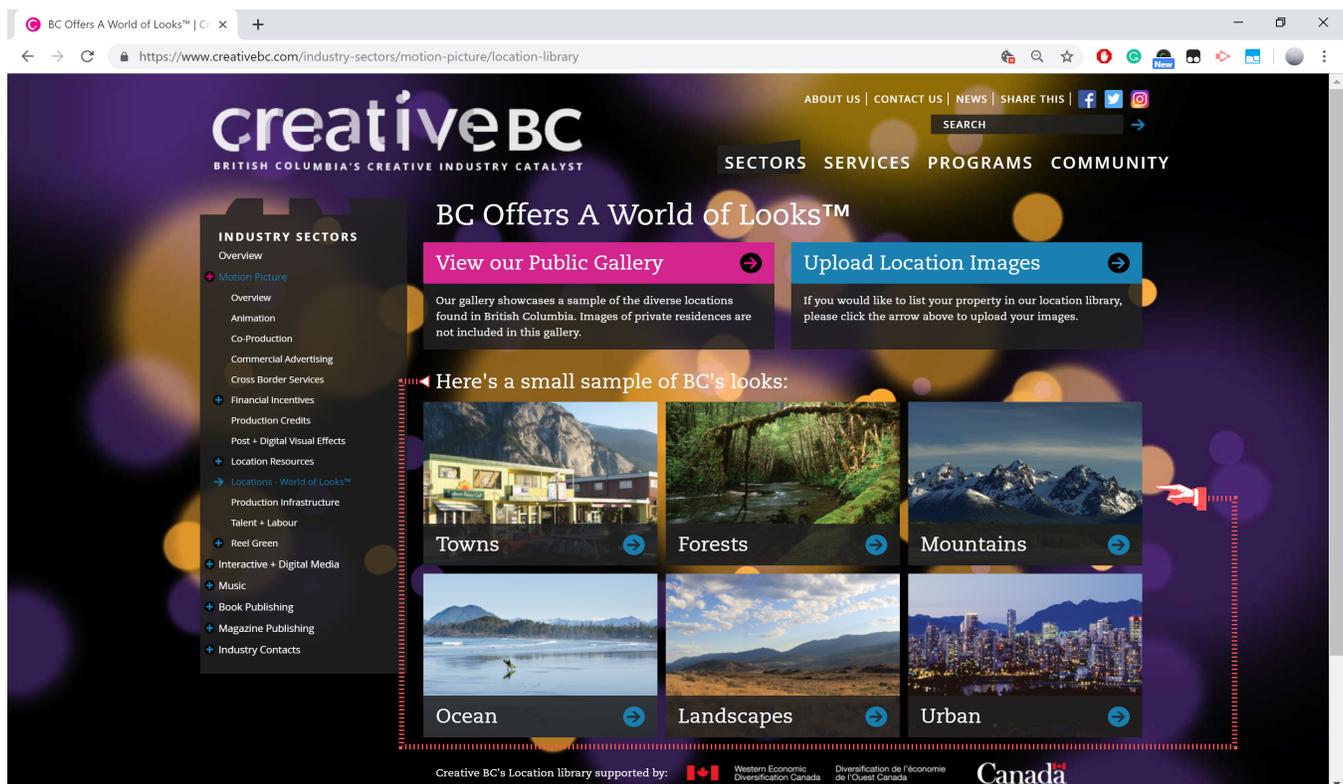


Figure 1. CreativeBC's online catalogue, 'A World of Looks', is where film industry location scouts can find sites for their productions.

imagination, but it is willingly hijacked and Frankensteined into cuts, angles, and proper lighting to make the province appear as anything but itself.

BC is a confluence of several overlapping ecological zones rendering it an efficient and ideal candidate for film and tv productions that require a diversity of backdrops. The proximity to ocean, mountains, desert, and forest from Vancouver (Figure 3) makes BC a multifaceted actor that can throw its hat into many rings: play the West Coast, play the Pacific Northwest, play the Hinterlands, play the Wild West, etc. Supplementing the provincial landscape diversity, is the architectural grab-bag of Vancouver<sup>2</sup>. As BC's primary urban center, Vancouver also offers a compressed array of architectural typologies that are sprinkled throughout the city (Figure 2). From luxury glass towers to the newly cobbled streets of Gastown, Vancouver easily becomes an on-screen chameleon. Despite Vancouver's ability to play a range of locations, the city itself has been unable to cultivate a recognizable urban fabric.

By repeatedly playing surrogate, BC is failing to nourish its own cultural wealth; the opportunity for its multifaceted Natures and Peoples to be seen through film is unrealized. By taking a closer look at how the film industry has leveraged BC for its own production, can we in fact learn about the particularities of the region and how it may play itself?

In an effort to understand and not disqualify the layered complexities of the relationship between film and architecture, we have taken an approach that tests multiple entry points. We are interested in how architectural thinking can be informed by multiple ways of investigation and accessibility rather than a singular, autonomous approach. The plurality of our methods reflect a desire to engage ways of seeing and learning: film and television, history, planning, landscape, and architecture.

The 'x-ray' feature of Amazon Prime is called to mind. This feature offers the viewer an option to expand an overlay screen which provides additional information regarding actors, actresses, music, and trivia related to the feature they are watching. Amazon sources its x-ray information from its subsidiary company IMDB, which already lists filming locations on its website (with the additional choice to search other movies filmed in the same places). Expanding the x-ray feature to include information about the place a film is shot could have a sizable impact on how films could educate their audiences. The seemingly simple addition of this information on a streaming service like Amazon Prime would give voice and meaning to place, through a highly accessible and used platform (Figures 6 and 7).

The next enquiry critiques the current practice of filming in Vancouver and the surrounding BC region. Our particular case study is the Lions Gate Bridge, which is undoubtedly one of

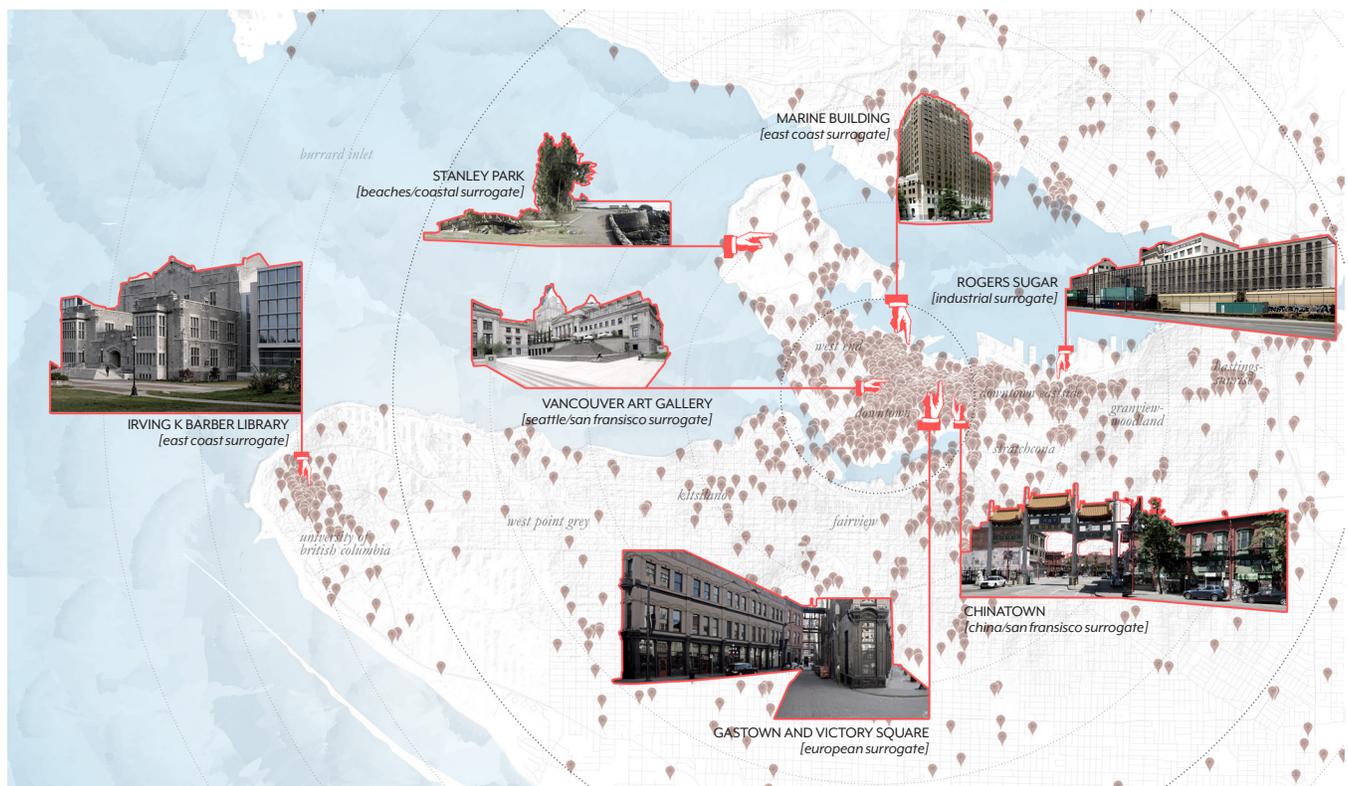


Figure 2. A diversity of architectures exist in Vancouver that are used as surrogates for other geographies on film. Image by authors.

the most iconic pieces of infrastructure in Vancouver, and yet in film, it is muted, playing a nameless backdrop for another city. The construction of the Lions Gate Bridge was formative in the development and evolution of the city by solidifying a connection from the downtown core to the mountainous northern landscape - a quality which Vancouver regularly brands. Organized to provide jobs during the Depression, the bridge project reorganized movement through the city as well as the province<sup>3</sup>. The drawings explore this silenced piece of infrastructure and its historic play in the the urbanization of the North Shore, and thus the expansion and connection of the larger Vancouver metropolitan region to the province's much loved Hinterlands. (Figures 6-8)

Figure 4 shows popular filming locations in Vancouver<sup>4</sup>. While the sheer density of dots is impressive, the gaps are perhaps more telling. These voids represent areas where little to no filming has occurred, suggesting that these places cannot play surrogate; they are thus hypothesized to be too specific, too unique. One such gap is in Vancouver's West End - a residential neighborhood in the city's downtown peninsula. A closer look reveals that a preserved 20' setback, originating from the area's first Victorian home development, still plays a part in shaping the unique character of the West End today. As higher density housing has developed in the area, the setback has been maintained, creating a series of present day green ribbons in

the neighborhood particularly characteristic of this neighborhood (Figure 5).

The Surrogate is a beginning; an invitation to consider how the manipulation and curation of architecture and landscape within mass media affect, guide, and shape our perceptions of place and geographic identities.

#### ENDNOTES

1. Mike Gasher, *Hollywood North: the feature film industry in British Columbia* (Vancouver: UBC Press, 2002).
2. Justine Elias, "The City That Can Sub for All of America," *New York Times*, November 17, 1996.
3. "Lions Gate Bridge," Vancouver Heritage Foundation, accessed January 10, 2020, <https://www.vancouverheritagefoundation.org/place-that-matters/lions-gate-bridge/>.
4. Jeff Hitchcock, "Movie Locations," Movie Maps, accessed January 10, 2020, [moviemaps.org/locations](http://moviemaps.org/locations).

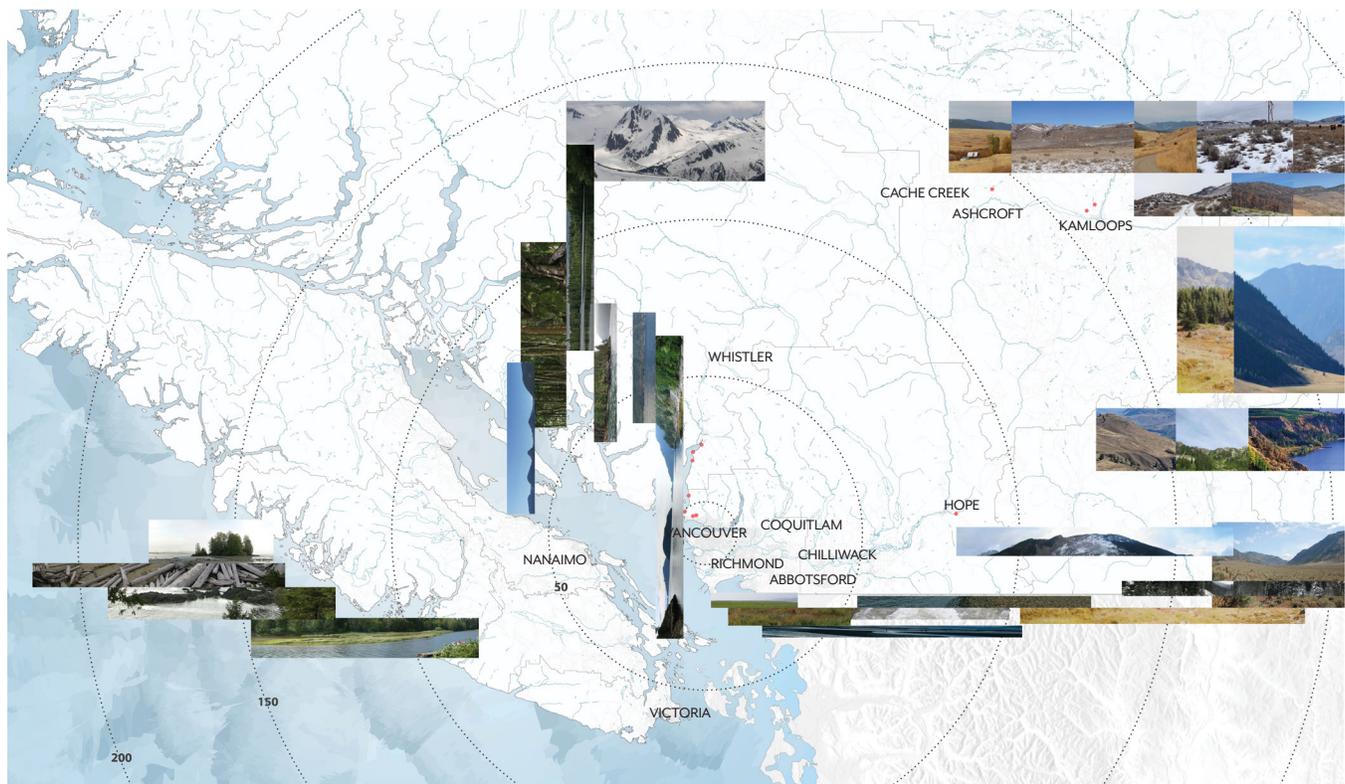


Figure 3. Numerous landscape typologies are within a two hour drive of BC's only metropolitan center, Vancouver. Image by authors.

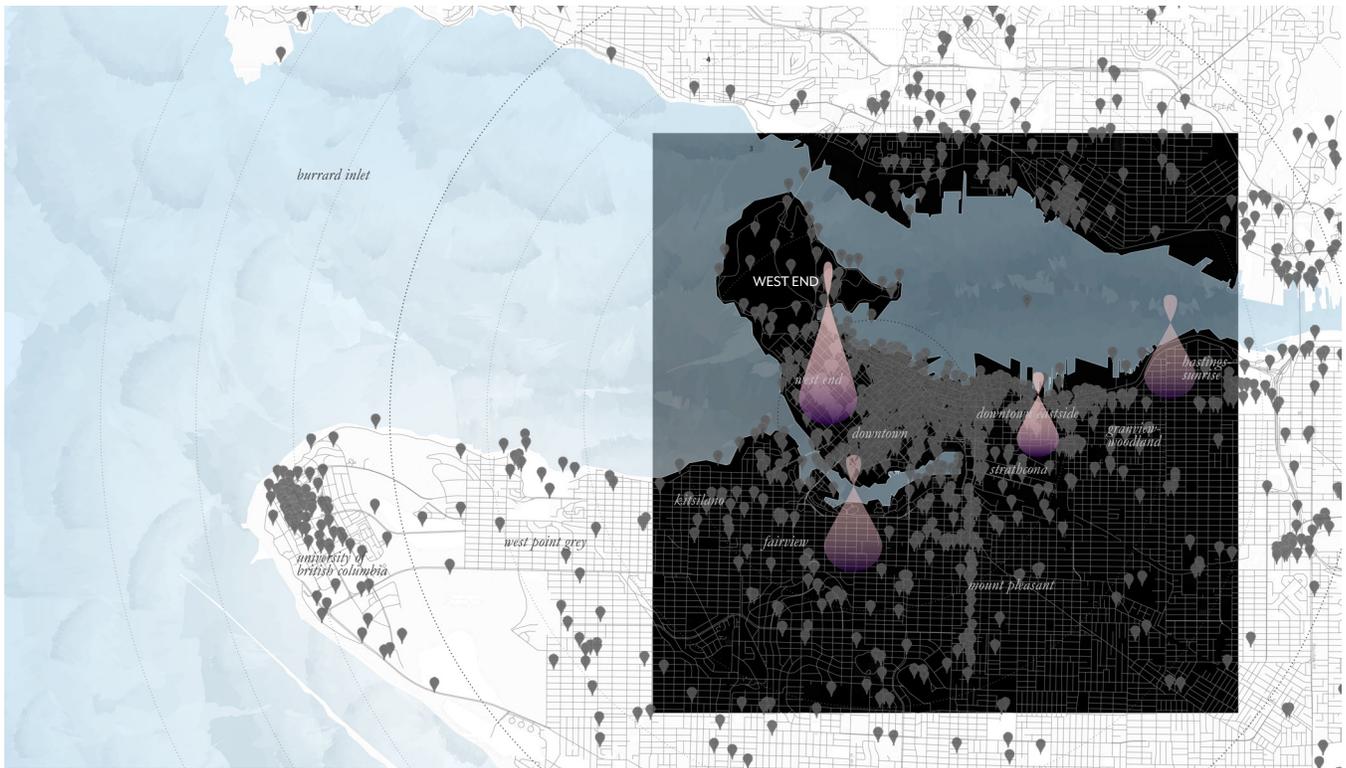


Figure 4. Points identifying popular filming locations in Vancouver's downtown core. Image by authors.

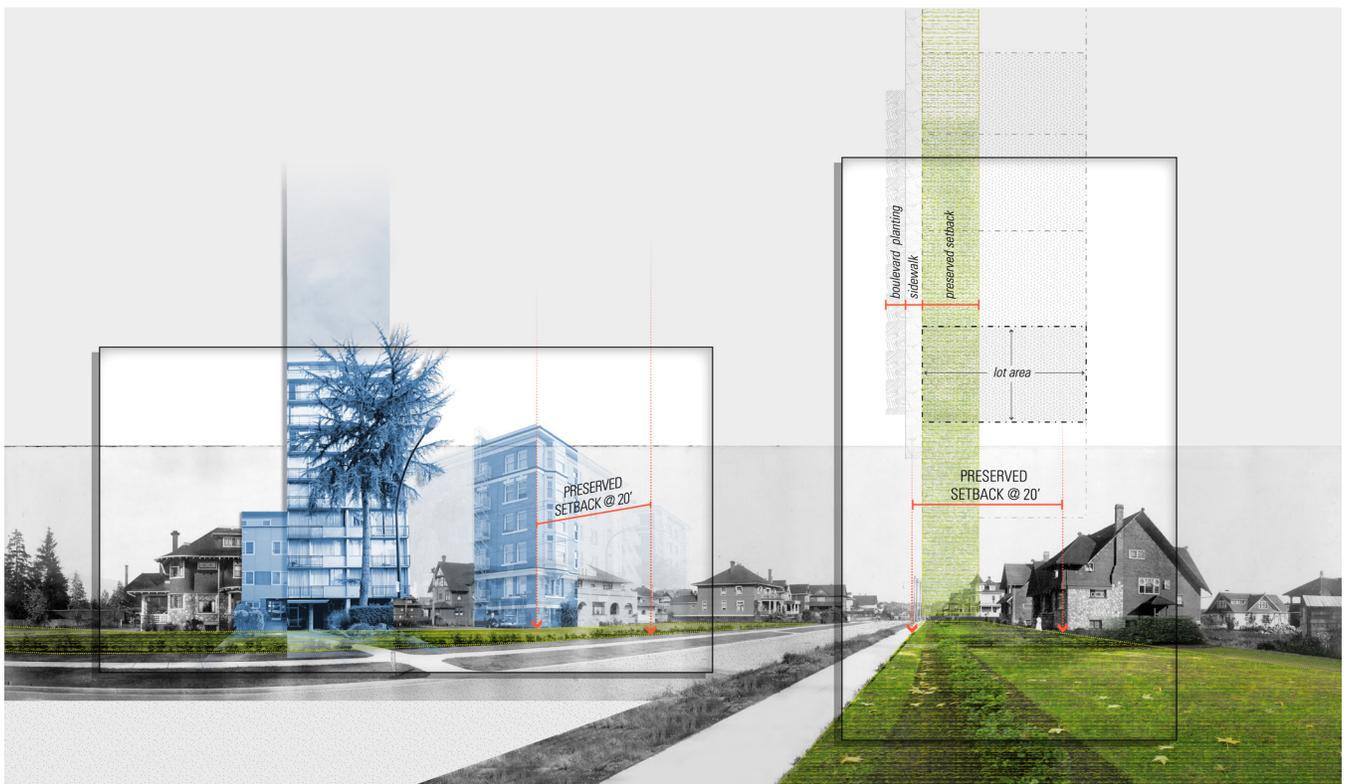


Figure 5. The West End, a Vancouver neighborhood that is not a popular filming locale, is categorized by its uniquely wide setbacks, an urban planning legacy. Image by authors.

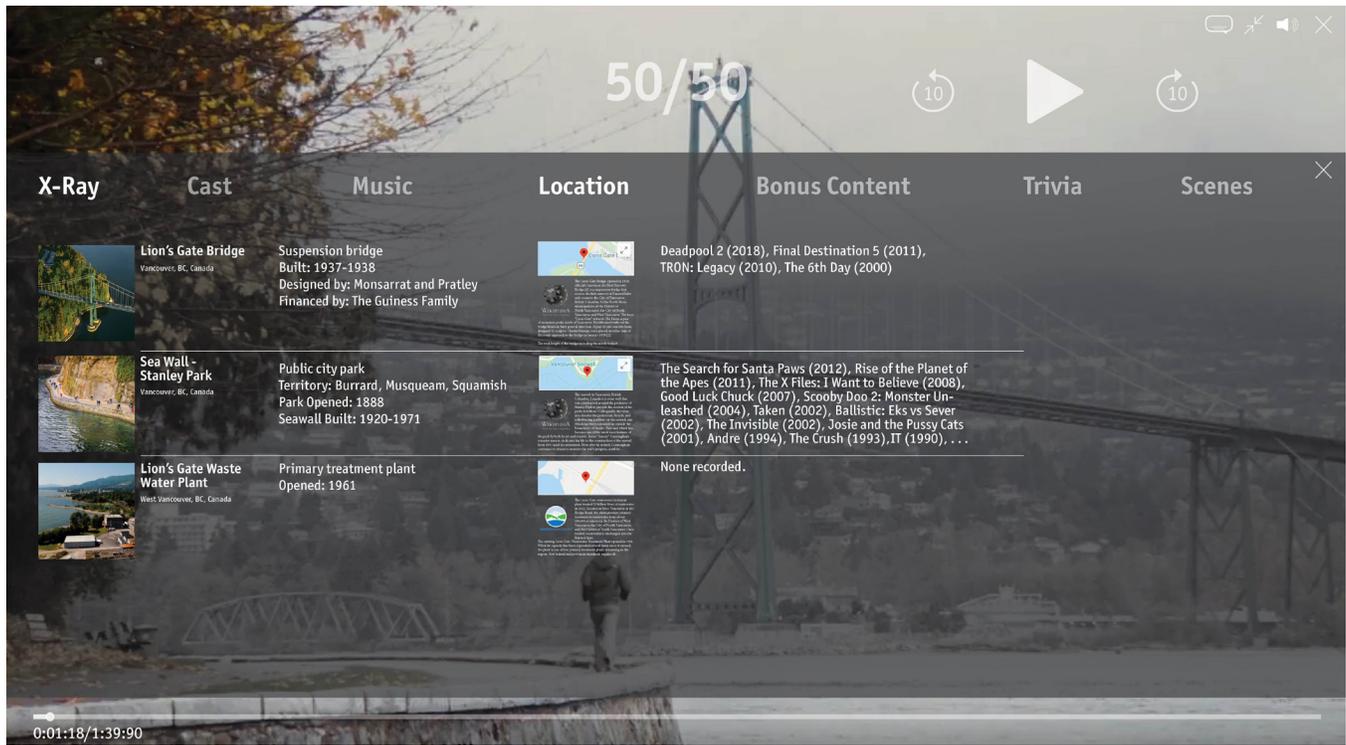


Figure 6. The 2011 film 50/50's opening sequence is shot on Vancouver's seawall with the Lion's Gate Bridge in the background; the film takes place in Seattle, WA. Image by authors.



Figure 7. The Amazon Prime platform allows viewers 'X-Ray' view, giving them instant information on the actors, music, and making of the film they are watching. Image by authors.

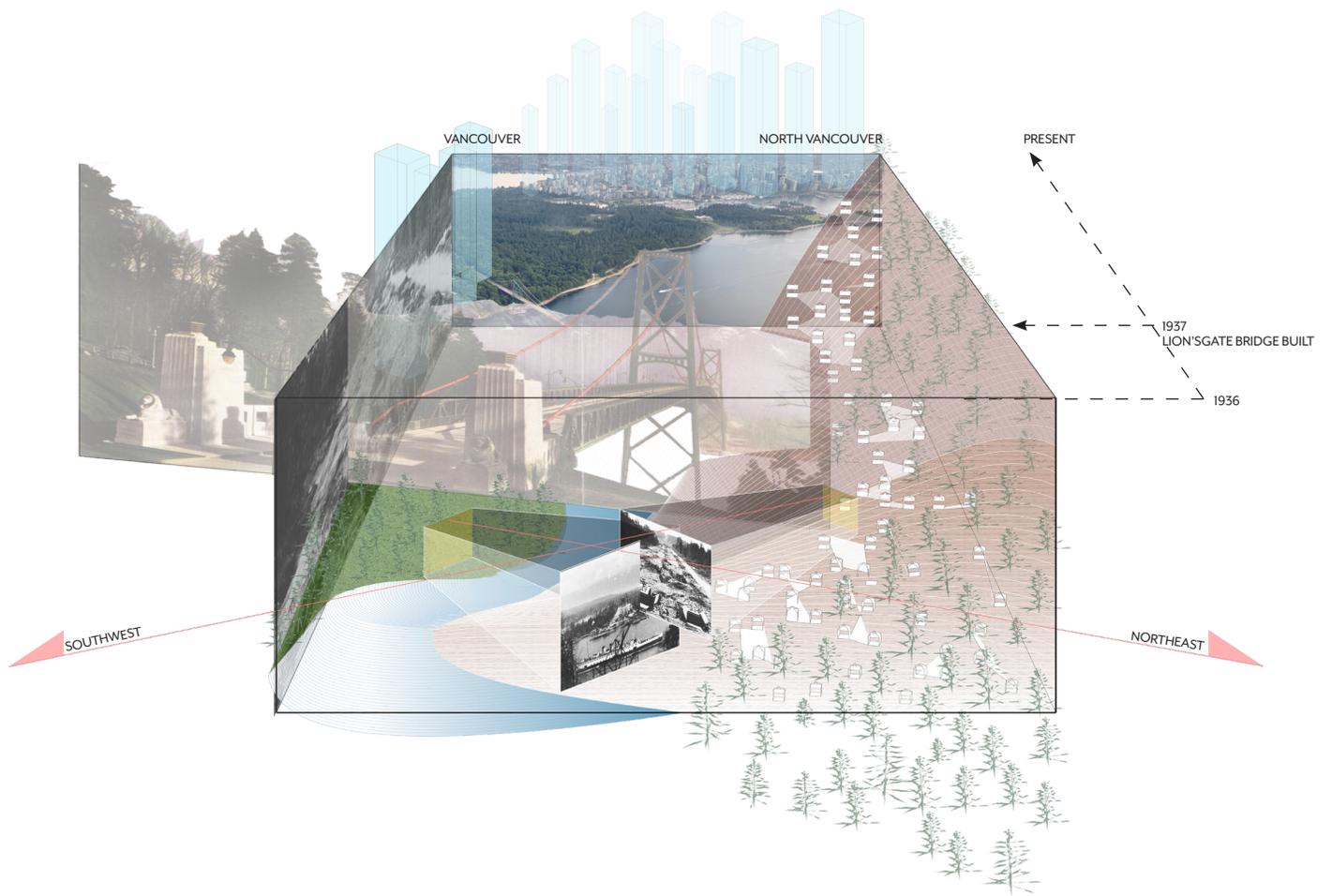


Figure 8. To Vancouverites, The Lion's Gate Bridge is an icon; however, to most of the world it is unknown or known to be in other cities. Image by authors.