

The Province

Opposing ideas battle it out on the streets; Does the neighbourhood need its own community plan?

Tue Feb 3 2009

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Section: News

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Source: The Province

Series: Operation Phoenix: Part 2: The impact of gentrification and the Olympics

Illustrations: Colour Photo: Arlen Redekop, The Province / Leslie Snelling, a Downtown Eastsider who's on income assistance, talks to a reporter near the Woodward's development, the flagship of change in the area.

Colour Photo: Sam Leung, The Province / "I think the drug problems are being used as an excuse to allow developers to do this." - Wendy Pedersen of the Carnegie Community Action Project

Colour Photo: Sam Leung, The Province / A cart full of personal belongings is wheeled past a billboard on Alexander Street.

Colour Photo: Sam Leung, The Province / A man pushes a cart of empty containers across the intersection of Hastings and Carrall.

Colour Photo: Arlen Redekop, The Province / "We really see Hastings as our retail spine, but it's sorely lacking. We'd like to see it provide more amenities to the community and to the 8,000 employees who work here." - Cathy Kwan, Strathcona Business Improvement Association

Wendy Pedersen lives on a street that straddles the future of the Downtown Eastside.

On the north side of Powell and Main is the \$1,000-a-month suite she shares with her two children in the Four Sisters housing co-op. Across the street is the Concord Pacific Smart condo, with 90 units priced from \$239,500 to more than \$500,000.

"This represents everything we think is going wrong in our neighbourhood," says the anti-gentrification activist with the Carnegie Community Action Project.

At the root of the debate over "revitalization," she believes, is a desire for developers to get their hands on "the most valuable land in the city right now."

"I think the drug problems are being used as an excuse to allow developers to do this. We're expendable. We're being starved out."

For the five years leading up to 2010, she explains, planned and completed condos outnumber social-housing developments three to one. Her group is lobbying the city for a moratorium on new condos and wants a plan to balance growth with a housing mix of 25 per cent market to 75 per cent low-income.

Ethel Whitty, Carnegie Centre director, sums up residents' view of development in one word: fear.

"It's the fear of being displaced if condos or developers move in: Where will they go? Will they be homeless?"

Yet developers, shop owners and city planners see gentrification as a key transition.

"You need change," says Downtown Eastside city planner Jessica Chen.

"Historically, revitalization has worked in the Downtown Eastside. Revitalization without displacement is our philosophy."

The issue of how to "fix" the Downtown Eastside has been stalled in part due to this years-long war of

philosophies and ideologies.

It's a battle of harm reduction versus drug crackdown. Of increased social welfare versus increased self-sufficiency. Of social housing versus market housing, condos versus single-room-occupancy hotels. Diversification versus centralization. Development versus preservation. Free drugs versus detox. Yuppies or the low-income community. Remand centres or rehab. A handout or a hand up. The result is stasis: lots of effort, by many dedicated people, but no great change.

Elvin Wyly, a University of B.C. geography professor and author of a gentrification textbook, says the paradox of gentrification is it can benefit a place while putting people at a disadvantage.

"If you have improved retail and public services because the neighbourhood has greater political clout if market-rate condo owners live there, that will provide benefits. Unfortunately, fewer poor people will be living there to enjoy those benefits. There's a tension between helping places and helping particular populations of people. Gentrification magnifies that tension."

The struggle over gentrification mirrors the greater struggle to determine the future of the Downtown Eastside. That future is uncertain.

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Sitting in the office of the Carnegie Community Action Project, volunteer Jean Swanson explains her take on why the area is faltering.

"People always say so much money has been poured into the neighbourhood and nothing's improved, and so therefore we should gentrify. But no one ever talks about how much money has been pulled out of the neighbourhood," she says, referring to minimum wages and social-assistance rates that have not kept pace with the cost of living. This, she says, is one of the real reasons for decline. With less to spend, residents can't support businesses. Shops close. Crime rises.

"It used to be a poor neighbourhood, but it was much healthier. We don't want to say it should be revitalized. We say we're pretty vital already. If you denigrate residents and the area, you make it OK to take it away from them," says Swanson, who joined the Downtown Eastside Residents' Association in the 1970s.

On a tour of the neighbourhood, Pedersen points out an empty storefront at Main and Cordova. A common sight, except this is a freshly renovated storefront with 12 vacant single-room-occupancy (SRO) units above. The store used to be Vic's, a diner catering to locals. Now Waves coffee house, with its neon signs and wifi, has moved in.

It's the latest example of stores and SROs giving way to gentrification -- activists call it "renoviction" -- but not the only one. Pedersen points to "soft conversions" of SROs into backpacker, student or daily or weekly room rentals. She cites a loss of 448 low-rent housing units between December 2007 and April 2008 alone. The B.C. government has now purchased 23 SROS in downtown Vancouver with about 1,330 rooms that will be preserved. But, the way locals see it, according to a 2008 Carnegie report called *Nothing About Us Without Us*, they are locked in a "struggle for the survival of the community."

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Farther east from where Pedersen laments the loss of Vic's to gentrification, Cathy Kwan of the Strathcona Business Improvement Association talks wistfully about more new businesses coming in to revitalize the Hastings corridor and give the association's 460 businesses a boost.

"Drug use and dealing have been our biggest problems. We're in a light-industrial area and there aren't many people on the street," says the BIA executive director.

Crime is another deterrent. In 2008, Wing Wing Co. Ltd. lost \$40,000 after thieves stripped copper pipes from the walls. Kwan says vacancies on her strip are at 30 per cent, though rents are low, at \$15 a square foot. The BIA spends a third of its budget on security. Kwan desperately wants more beat officers.

"We really see Hastings as our retail spine, but it's sorely lacking. We'd like to see it provide more amenities to the community and to the 8,000 employees who work here. We don't have much diversity."

Walking along Hastings one afternoon, Kwan points to a bright spot where Les Amis du Fromage plans to open a wine and cheese bar and store. Les Amis manager Joe Chaput thinks the area has potential.

"We live in the area and there's nowhere to spend your money," says the co-owner of the new Au Petit Chavignol. Entrepreneurs are seeing Strathcona's hip homeowners as potential customers. "I've had people in the food business asking me to keep an eye out for

space," he says.

These are businesses Kwan would like to see more of. But then she turns back to her office and there's a woman standing in the street in thigh-high black boots. Clearly, the area has a ways to go.

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Further west, in Gastown, is the model eastside BIAs look to. Gastown and parts of Chinatown have seen a dramatic overhaul. Reliance Holdings' Jon Stovell has been responsible for much of it and he believes development is the answer to the eastside's ills.

"All that's wrong with the neighbourhood is it's unhealthily concentrated on one socio-economic sector," says the former BIA president. "I understand they're worried if their community is populated by others, they'll be rejected by their neighbourhood. But that hasn't happened in Gastown. People are incredibly tolerant."

Reliance's 2002 Malkin Building loft conversion at 55 Water Street that rented for up to \$3,000 launched the shift east. The Koret Lofts, with units listed up to \$1 million in 2004, was another. The "W" Woodward's condo that sold out in 2006, was the tipping point.

High-end retailers like Obakki, Hunt and Gather and Dutil moved in to clothe urban hipsters. Furniture shops like Inform and Koolhaus filled suites. Marketing and design companies established offices. Slick restaurants like Boneta and Two Chefs and a Table drew diners. What worked in Gastown, Stovell says, can work farther east, but residents must see the benefits.

"Commercial activity produces economic benefits that can be used to support non-market housing. We can all live together. The thing that works against it is fear of change."

To temper that fear, the Carnegie's Whitty points out that, no matter what developers desire, the Downtown Eastside will never be Yaletown.

"There are 5,000 units of social housing and that's not going to go away. If development moves east, people might be thinking we're going to be another Yaletown, but there's a low-income community here that's going to stay."

Even without a Yaletown overhaul, housing activists don't agree diversification is the solution.

"Some think concentrating low-income people in one area causes problems," says the Carnegie Community Action Project report, *Nothing About Us Without Us*. "But could it be problems are caused by lack of housing, inadequate income and insufficient health services, not the concentration?"

If there's going to be co-operation between groups in the Downtown Eastside, some argue it's going to have to be drawn up like a truce.

Former Carnegie Centre director Michael Clague is working to broker that peace through the non-profit Building Community Society, which advocates for responsible renewal. He says the key to revitalization is a community plan drafted with real input from residents to create a community neither gentrified nor ghettoized. Clague stresses the city must be involved.

"A plan," he says simply, "would reduce the friction."

Until then, the Downtown Eastside may keep taking sides, with the community as the casualty.

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