

City design fails in Downtown Eastside



BOB RANSFORD
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REAL ESTATE MATTERS

The sun warmed the morning air. The stench made it heavy. It was a stench that couldn't be worse in a third-world slum.

I was walking from downtown Vancouver's Granville and Cordova to Alexander and Princess.

Those weren't dog droppings I stepped around twice. Clearly, this sidewalk was also a latrine.

Finally, I reverted to walking down the centre of the street to avoid stepping on the discarded needles or avoid disrupting the lifeless figures littering both sidewalks. If I didn't know better, I would have thought they were dead bodies in a war zone.

A few were in various fetus positions, lying on scraps of cardboard. One or two were propped against the chain-link fences, topped with razor-wire coils — a last attempt at enforcing a standoff between the out-of-control street activity and the few remaining gritty industries struggling to survive in the neighbourhood.

This was once a true mixed-use neighbourhood where people lived, worked and played in a compact few blocks within an easy stroll of the central business district.

Today, the faces of the men and women who lined up in the early morning outside the soup kitchen are like the faces of the buildings along these few blocks — hollow, lifeless, desperate and neglected.

It was just short of nine in the morning. It must have been a rough night for most of these late risers. The street along which I walked was a bedroom, bathroom and rec room.

I passed at least eight different locations I could easily identify as official homes to society's marginalized. There were surely others I didn't recognize. Some are located in the few heritage buildings remaining in what was once the heart of the city.



IAN SMITH/VANCOUVER SUN

Heroin user fixes in the alley off Main and Hastings; gentrification will help normalize a distorted community.

These non-market housing projects, some of them temporary shelters for the homeless and others permanent homes for the lesser-advantaged, or what social planners classify as "the hard to house", those with "special needs" or people with "limited incomes".

These social housing projects aren't limited to the few blocks along the street I walked. This pattern of public housing is repeated along at least two parallel streets and a few cross-streets.

In the same area, I would have trouble counting more than a half dozen multi-family market housing projects. These housing developments are on the vanguard of local gentrification — the real city pushing east, pushing property prices higher and slowly bring change to the area.

There are those who welcome this gentrification as the final saving grace for this neglected district.

Of course, there are also those who loath such change. They cherish this unique neighbourhood that has a reputation — a neighbourhood meeting needs that other parts of the city turn their back on.

They see gentrification as a threat to the lesser-advantaged. They see society as having failed these people. At least this neighbourhood provides them with their most basic needs.

Where does society's caring start? What is the general equalizing force that allows people to co-exist in urban areas? Isn't it community?

Of course, community is much more than buildings, streets, parks, schools, offices, shops and churches. Built form is only one determinant of community. But it is an essential component.

The way we design our streets and buildings and the fabric of land uses that knit together to make a neighbourhood largely dictate how people interact with each other, what they value and how they activate what are society's essentials — individual rights and responsibilities.

The design of these few square blocks I travelled the other morning has failed by not achieving community.

Real community — one that embraces all kinds of all means — doesn't exist because the mix of uses in this district is distorted. Gentrification will help repair that distortion and normalize the mix, bringing to the area more market housing.

Those who are currently warehoused in non-market housing projects — created and maintained by people with good intentions and a sincere commitment to helping society's most vulnerable — should have no fear.

The homes for the needy are secure, if only by the very nature of their tenure. What real change in the neighbourhood will hopefully bring is people who care and have hope. Those who today call the neighbourhood home most surely care, but the hope seems to be missing.

Bob Ransford is a public affairs consultant with COUNTERPOINT COMMUNICATIONS INC. He is a former real estate developer who specializes in urban land use issues. Contact him at: ransford@counterpointcom.com