

Final Project December 15, 2003
Undergraduate Semester In Dialogue

FINDING THE MOTHER OF COMMUNITY

OLIVE DEMPSEY

EVEN this close to downtown, the buildings are small. This landscape is from a time when bustling city centres were not synonymous with glass towers, live-work studios and lifestyle marketing. Tonight I am surrounded by wood shingled houses and brick or concrete four story apartments, glowing under the rain and street lights. I am walking through Canada's 'worst' neighbourhood, our poorest postal code, North America's largest open drug market, on my way to the theatre.

SOON, I am sitting on red metal bleachers in a school gymnasium, singing along with 250 other voices. This is not why we are here, it is just a warm-up, a way to keep us occupied while actors tie laces on costumes, arrange plastic bags in a shopping cart and readjust someone's kimono. We are here to see *In the Heart of a City*, a play by and about Vancouver's oldest neighbourhood. It is the result of a year-long effort by residents to reclaim their community's stories, with the support of the Carnegie Community Centre and a few professional directors and writers. Tonight, we are here to be told tales different from the ones we know, tales that do not focus on 'drug

infested alleys' and 'the walking wounded.'

THE community's efforts have packed the house since the show opened, but these volunteers are not the first to recognize that change on the ground needs to begin with the attitudes of those who walk it. Thirty years ago, the Downtown Eastside Resident's Association (DERA) launched another effort to shift perceptions of the neighbourhood and its inhabitants. One of the young organization's first acts renamed the area derisively known as Skid Road to its official and now infamous title, the Downtown Eastside.

ALTHOUGH it is rarely discussed in the media, both the name-change and the play belong to a history of community activism, one proudly presented in the recent performances. There are the unemployed workers who occupied the top floor of the Carnegie museum in 1935 to protest unemployment. There are the mother's of the Raymur Housing Complex who, in 1971, sat on the train tracks that ran through their neighbourhood until the rail company promised to build an overpass for their kids. And today, there are tent cities raised to protest welfare reforms, a lack of social housing, and to provide a source of community for the homeless population. As Vancouver's original town site and longtime home of labourers and new immigrants, Downtown Eastside residents have fought for over one hundred years to maintain the integrity of their voices and bring recognition

to their concerns as they claim this neighbourhood and its future as their own.

IN some ways DERA succeeded in its efforts to raise the neighbourhood's profile. Today, the Downtown Eastside is better known than ever. So popular it can be hard to find, submerged beneath the gallons of ink spilled in describing the details of its faults and its road to recovery. With the overwhelming amount of attention, governments at all levels have mobilized to change the neighbourhood once again, through a process known as 'revitalization.'

THE Vancouver Agreement, signed in 2000, places the Downtown Eastside under the spotlight of Vancouver's development efforts, uniting all three levels of government towards the revitalization goal. After an initial commitment of approximately \$13.9 million, Provincial and Federal governments announced another \$20 million investment in the area in April 2003. The Vancouver Agreement unifies a labyrinth of strategies, actions plans, capacity studies, reports, initiatives and partnerships. Within the maze are tactics such as the Four Pillars harm reduction program, economic plans to attract 'legitimate business' to the area, heritage building preservation incentives, community economic development, street level beautification, an affordable housing strategy and community policing.

THE language, at least, speaks of good intentions. A staff report to City Council in 2000 stated, "the

City believes that all residents should be able to walk the streets in relative safety; that the Downtown Eastside should have a lively streetscape with active businesses and services; and the community residents should have the opportunity to make the best of their lives and have access to secure affordable housing." On paper the goals seem straightforward.

MANY question, however, whether these efforts will bring empowerment and dignity to Downtown Eastside residents, or quietly remove them, their histories of resistance, and the strong communities they have formed.

COMMON concerns about revitalization claim it is gentrification in a nicer package. In the end, both displace longtime, low-income residents with those able to shop at expensive stores and pay higher rents. This result may be inescapable because one of the largest concerns about revitalization lies in the term itself. According to community researcher, Jeff Sommers, "Revitalization implies that whatever is going on is not vital already." Built into the word are the dismissive attitudes, In the Heart of the City attempts to change. These attitudes assume the neighbourhood is inherently flawed, missing the necessary conditions for a good community.

MUGGS Sigurgeirson disagrees. This characterization does not apply to her neighbourhood. Sigurgeirson has lived in the

area for 27 years and sat on the board of the Carnegie Community Centre for 17. She speaks passionately about the Centre and the Downtown Eastside population it serves. “My problem is remembering to leave the neighbourhood,” she says. As we tour the hundred year old stone building, she lists Carnegie’s accomplishments like a proud parent.

ON the top floor, is the learning centre, which provides support ranging from computer skills to basic reading and math, and recently won a national literacy award. Across the hall is a smaller room that holds quiet events such as Chinese calligraphy and yoga classes.

Everything, she boasts “is so well used” and, she adds, “it’s free.” The Carnegie is the only community centre in the City where nothing, except the concession’s food is bought or sold, no payment for classes, not even a pop machine. It is also the only community centre in North America open every day of the year. Christmas is the exception, when they stay open 24 hours.

THE scent of coffee and eggs greets us as we come through the doors to the second floor. The concession, where Sigurgeirson will be volunteering this afternoon, charges only \$1.75 a meal. Volunteers can also buy breakfast, lunch or dinner using four of the eight tickets they receive for a four hour shift. This is vital according to Sigurgeirson, with so many residents on social assistance or pensions. The

extra meals of healthy food make the month go by with less hunger and stress.

THE ceilings in the Carnegie Centre are high and the windows stretch tall and wide, filling the room with light. Visitors chat as they carry their trays to wooden tables. Through the eating area, Sigurgeirson points out another large space where they hold monthly dinners, the week before Welfare Wednesday, a time when money is low or gone and there are still a few more days to go before the cheques come. Today the hall is being decorated for the volunteer Christmas party. The list of activities goes on. Three times a week, they have music jams when the centre lends out instruments so musicians or aspiring musicians from the neighbourhood can practice together. Some even recorded and released a cd, played at the opening of the Folk Festival a few years ago.

THE man on the bench near the doors could have been one of the performers. His head is down, his boot marking a rhythm as his fingers skip across guitar strings. The strap over his broad shoulders is frayed and around the guitar’s centre is a yellow circle, where the varnish has away over the years, with so many hands making music. His deflated nylon backpack and lumpy sleeping bag are leaning against the wall beside him and he has not noticed us. It is the dignity of this moment that makes my eyes burn with tears. I imagine those hands held out, asking for

change, those boots standing in one of many lines, the Salvation Army for shelter, the Union Gospel Mission for food. Here, he is full of music, his fingers are certain in every movement, and he is strong.

WHEN Sigurgeirson joined the board it was because of her father. Several years earlier, he had come to live with her and soon spent most of his days at the Carnegie. As he aged, he started wandering and getting lost. She began visiting the centre more and more, looking for him. Volunteers and patrons quickly caught on. As she hurried up the spiral marble stairs, they would shout, “Stanley’s at Victory Square” or “He’s in Oppenheimer park.” Sometimes, if they found Stanley too far out of the neighbourhood, they would bring him back to the Carnegie Centre to wait for Muggs. It was around this time that Sigurgeirson was asked to join the Board and could not refuse. “My father was able stay out of institutionalization and I was able to continue to work because of the massive community support here,” she says.

THE Carnegie Centre is at an intersection that has been described as the Downtown Eastside’s “ground zero,” the notorious Main and Hastings, the centre of Vancouver’s ‘drug ghetto.’ But if it sits in the vortex of such a supposedly decimated area, why is the community centre one of the most well used in the City? Their public library reading room is the busiest one in Vancouver and

the Carnegie Centre’s volunteer program is recognized as one of the best in Canada. Three to four hundred volunteers keep the three floors of programs, resources, and a food concession running, and the Centre sees 1800 to 2000 visitors a day. Sigurgeirson tells me throughout our tour that the Centre exists because the neighbourhood is dedicated, involved. They make not just the day-to-day operation, but events like the community play, possible.

SIGURGEIRSON believes the poverty and hardship in the Downtown Eastside make the community stronger, not weaker. “Low income people learn to help each other,” she says, “... the basic history [of the neighbourhood] is coming from industrial workers and trade unionists whose response to social problems has been to organize. That is the legacy of the community that taught us to do this stuff.” According to her, there is plenty of life here, plenty of things worth saving.

THE state of the neighbourhood is one that many find confounding. Poverty and drug addiction flourish in prosperous Vancouver, challenging economists’ logic that wealth benefits all around it. Many descriptions of the Downtown Eastside begin with creation stories, theories about its origins. These narratives are an attempt to make sense of the present and future by making sense of the past, and they say as much about current assumptions as they do about actual histories.

POPULAR versions of the Downtown Eastside's history are straightforward. They describe a bustling neighbourhood, a good kid fallen victim to an unfortunate set of circumstances, the elimination of street car and ferry services to the area, a decline in the resource-based economy where many residents worked and a shift west in downtown development efforts. They tell of forces that weakened the ability of local businesses to stop a tidal wave of drugs and crime pushing the neighbourhood over the edge, plummeting to its current state. According to the City of Vancouver's neighbourhood history web site: "[m]ore people addicted to the drug came into the community and resorted to theft to pay for their habit. The goods they stole led to a preponderance of secondhand stores that bought the items, giving birth to a whole industry and making it very difficult for legitimate businesses to function."

A study by the Carnegie Community Action Project (CCAP) on the decline of retail stores in the area, points to a more complex situation. According to the report, "...the drug trade, often held up as a cause of the decline, may have simply filled a vacuum left by already-retreating retail, only then becoming a factor in the further decline of the street." The study goes on to point out that, while common theories suggest that retail was unable to survive due to the prevalence of low-income residents, income demographics

changed very little in the times between a healthy retail community and the decline.

THE CCAP report also highlights often overlooked contributors from outside the area. Factors such as a consumer trend towards "suburban shopping, large malls and big box stores," displacement in the wake of Expo '86 and the de-institutionalization of people with mental illness, all worked to concentrate poverty in the area.

IN his dissertation about the neighbourhood, Sommers highlights the direct links between the area's current state and the gentrification of other areas. The recent renovations of Gastown to an upscale tourist destination shifted residents from affordable hotels and meeting places two blocks up to Hastings Street, now considered the neighbourhood's main strip. "The City's police, responding to political pressure exerted by resident groups in gentrifying neighbourhoods around the Central Business District, began relocating the street drug and sex trades to the Downtown Eastside, thus intensifying the scope and expanding the scale on which those activities took place there," writes Sommers.

ECONOMIC displacement in Kitsilano, Yaletown, Gastown and others have made the Downtown Eastside, according to DERA's Dale Mosley, the "tail end of a process that has happened all over the city... an outflow of people which flowed

into the Downtown Eastside” one of the last remaining areas in the city with low-income housing. “Problems in the DTES are not created in the DTES,” says Sommers, “[P]eople describe it as the epicentre, but epicentre means the point of origin the DTES is a place where the problems from the rest of society spill over.”

THIS is not a revelation. The Downtown Eastside represents the consequences of our affluence, just as the destructive consequences of political and economic decisions exist in all cities.

However, rarely, are they as concentrated and as visible as they are here. The deep poverty, high rates of homelessness, and open drug use have made it the focus of endless media and political attention. Sommers and Blomley write in the book, *Every Building on 100 West Hastings*, that these characteristics “are products of the same forces that induced the proliferation of condo towers, art galleries, restaurants, cafés, nightclubs, townhouses, heritage neighbourhoods, and inner city middle class consumers.”

YET, it is precisely these causes of concentrated poverty, the revitalization tactics of other neighbourhoods, that the City is introducing into the Downtown Eastside, as solutions. The visioning sketches for the Woodward’s building, a keystone development and symbol in the Downtown Eastside, show sidewalk cafés, art galleries, retail outlets and more than half the

housing units at market prices. According to the city, this building represents the revitalization goal, with one hundred units of affordable housing and the rest bringing in more affluent renters. But, as Heather Smith points out in her article *PLanning, Policy and Polarization in Vancouver’s Downtown Eastside* “the challenge... will be to ensure that any state sponsored revitalization does not pave the way for full scale gentrification and displacement of the neighbourhoods low income and service dependent populations.”

ACCORDING to Sommers, it is an impossible challenge. Once revitalization is in full swing, “people not living in publicly funded housing,” he says, “are going to be pushed out.” Even the Real Estate Foundation agrees. According to a 1999 report, between 1995 and 2005, there will be additional 10,000 market housing units in the Downtown Eastside, “which will dramatically alter the housing mix throughout the Downtown Eastside and into False Creek causing marked gentrification.” The report goes on to say, “[i]t is expected that, in the long term, redevelopment of Downtown Eastside sites will continue, creating pressure for higher land costs.” The lead-up to the Olympics in 2010 add an additional force to the market that has already, according the Real Estate Foundation, increased by 200% between 1986 and 1996.

REVITALIZATION may displace more than people. Sigurgeirson is certain the unique and vibrant community of the Carnegie Centre will

disappear if the pressures of gentrification manifest in the Downtown Eastside. “If yuppies moved in en masse they’d take over the board and put in programs that suited their needs,” she says. The Carnegie Centre plays a pivotal role in the neighbourhood’s community network and its loss would be monumental.

OURS is a society that has told citizens directly, through police and political pressures, or indirectly through rising land and housing costs, that they are not wanted in certain areas. For the displaced and others, the Downtown Eastside has become a place of acceptance that cannot be found elsewhere. Shawn, a housing activist who did not want me to use his last name told me, “I was homeless, from everywhere between here and Québec city, and always felt alienated ... when I’m in the Downtown Eastside it feels like I’m accepted here... I’ve had some extreme behaviour and people still accept me for who I am.”

I met Shawn and four other residents to talk about their participation in last year’s three-month-long squat of the empty Woodward’s building, now the Downtown Eastside’s symbol of change. Since the Woodward’s department store closed in 1992, the building they left behind has embodied the struggle for the neighbourhood and, in the recent squat, the power of the community to stand together and demand recognition. Concerns and tension

about gentrification, loss of affordable housing and community control have been mounting. They burst through the boarded up windows of the Woodward’s department store in the Fall of 2002 when a handful of activists launched an occupation of the vacant building.

WOODWARD’S has also been used as a symbol of community pride and of the Downtown Eastside’s final slide into decay. Since then, it has passed through various proposals from purely private development to social housing under the provincial NDP, back to potential sale to developers under the Provincial Liberals. Housing activists claimed the building as a reaffirmation of the need for social housing and community control in the area.

THE occupation of the building’s interior ended quickly, but the squat continued outside for three months with an estimated 200 people camped around the perimeter. Squatters maintained political pressure through organization and mutual support. “We had our own infrastructure,” says Jewel, one of the participants, “we had our own soup kitchens set up, we had volunteers ready to run it, control it, keep it working, we had our own security team running...” No matter which questions I asked during our interview almost everyone wanted to talk about the community they had at the squat and ways they can get it back.

As a result of the protest, the new City council, dominated by the Coalition of Progressive Electors, bought the building from the Provincial government in March 2003, with promises to use the space to support the interests of Downtown Eastside residents. COPE councilor, Ellen Woodsworth, speaking at a rally said, “We’re here in support of everyone’s right to affordable housing we need the province to provide social housing, we need the federal government to fund and help provide social housing and we all need to work together on this, this is a basic human right.” COPE, composed in part by community advocates and activists, promised a radically different approach to the Canada’s most talked about neighbourhood.

THE COPE solution put the squatters into two Single Room Occupancy hotels in the area. The notorious SRO’s are rooming houses, with tiny units and shared bathrooms. Many involved with the Woodward’s squat believe this was an intentional move to disrupt the bonds and solidarity created during the protest. Intentional or not, that is what happened. Once a force powerful enough to wrest a vacant city block from the hands of the Provincial government, those I spoke to say the community of the Woodward’s squat is scattered geographically and fragmented. Jewel wants to start a new squat, giving up the meager housing she has, to resurrect the solidarity of the Woodward’s

occupation.

JEWEL and the other participants banter and tease each other with the affection of family. There is only a small group of them left. I am worried. If removing the community from the squat ruptured their networks, what will displacing people from the neighbourhood do to the larger bonds and solidarity formed here?

THE Downtown Eastside is full of elements no one wanted in their own neighbourhoods. It is an unlikely place to look for lessons or inspiration. And yet, I have seen something I wish I had more of in my life, solidarity, mutual support and acceptance. If the revitalization efforts are successful, we will likely lose the spaces, the stories and the networks that sustain these qualities.

ON the night I saw *In the Heart of a City*, I bought a program with a poem by Sandy Cameron inside. It includes the phrase, “Memory is the mother of community.” If and when the clothing stores move in and the coffee shops and the nice apartments with the excellent, downtown locations, whose memory will we lose and whose will take its place? While so many talk about what the Downtown Eastside lacks I want to remind us of what it has. Community is not something we can afford to lose.