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VANCOUVER DOWNTOWN EASTSIDE REDEVELOPMENT PLANNING

Vancouver's Downtown Eastside has been a recurrent focus of redevelopment since the mid-twentieth century. This background paper examines the history of the Downtown Eastside and efforts to transform an area some have called "the birthplace of Vancouver."

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INTRODUCTION

Vancouver's Downtown Eastside is "a community rich in history, architecture, and diverse groups of people."¹ Comprised of the areas of Strathcona, Gastown, Oppenheimer, Victory Square, and Chinatown, the Downtown Eastside is home to some of the oldest residential and commercial districts in the city.²

The Downtown Eastside has been a recurrent focus of redevelopment since the mid-twentieth century. Academics, civic officials, governments, and private interests have proposed to redevelop Downtown Eastside neighbourhoods with initiatives ranging from large-scale urban renewal to community-based revitalization. This paper examines the history of efforts to alter an area some have called "the birthplace of Vancouver."³



A contemporary map of Vancouver showing the neighbourhoods encompassed by the Downtown Eastside.

Source: City of Vancouver, "Downtown Eastside Map,"
<http://vancouver.ca/commsvcs/planning/dtes/index.htm> (Accessed 21 October 2008).

HISTORY

The boundaries of the place now called the Downtown Eastside, including the name itself, have shifted significantly over time.⁴ Initially termed the East End, the Downtown Eastside developed in the 1880s and 1890s as an area of mixed industrial, residential, and commercial use. Local employment at the Hastings Sawmill and Canadian Pacific Railway yards attracted wage workers from different ethnic



The Hastings Sawmill facing Burrard Inlet (circa 1890s).

Source: British Columbia Archives, G-03061, "Vancouver. Hastings Mill."

backgrounds to the area. From the outset, the region stood in contrast to Vancouver's West End. As historian Patricia E. Roy explains, class, ethnic, and social dynamics divided the early urban landscape of Vancouver: "Competing business districts separated the two major residential districts, the varied East End and the generally affluent West End."⁵

Throughout the first half of the twentieth century, the Downtown Eastside grew as a community of social and economic diversity. In addition to being home to many single men and working class families, the area was a hub of warehousing, transportation, and

commercial activity.⁶ The Downtown Eastside's easy accessibility by streetcar, ferry, and steamship made it a thoroughfare for local residents and visitors.⁷

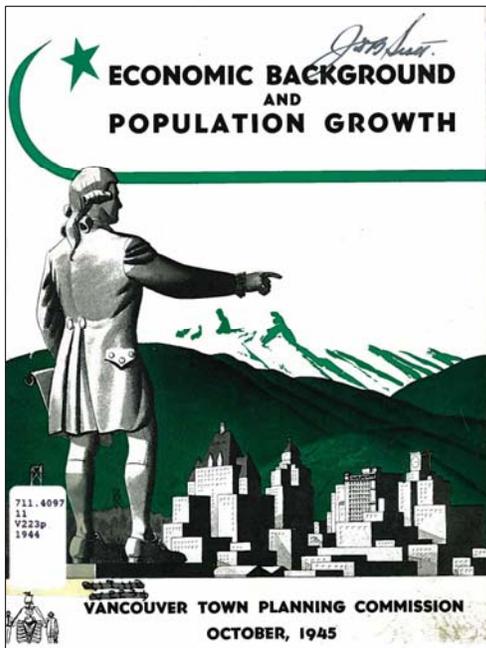
After World War Two, the economy of the Downtown Eastside began to decline. Transportation changes, notably the termination of BC Electric streetcar service and the North Shore ferries route, reduced pedestrian traffic in the area. Waning industrial work opportunities and a shift in retail businesses westward further drained the Downtown Eastside of its economic vitality. By the mid-1960s, the region began gaining notoriety as a hangout for single and unemployed men residing in "dollar-a-day" hotels and cheap rooming houses.⁸ "In the two decades after WWII," geographers Jeff Sommers and Nick Blomley write, "the vision of an unruly perilous territory crystallized in the minds of civic authorities and, ultimately, in the public imagination as a place called Skid Road."⁹ Discussed below, the Downtown Eastside's growing post-WWII reputation for social and economic problems fuelled plans to redevelop the area.

The Downtown Eastside has undergone significant changes throughout the last century. Despite having a reputation as a "skid road" district, the area has also been home to a relatively stable population of working class, low-income, and First Nations residents. Vancouver East MP Libby Davies describes the Downtown Eastside as "a community of people from many backgrounds and experiences who share the place as home in sometimes dire circumstances."¹⁰

EARLY URBAN RENEWAL PLANS

As early as the 1920s, concerns over haphazard urban growth, population increases, and blight in Vancouver prompted the development of new town planning initiatives. In 1925, the provincial government passed the Town Planning Act, granting municipal governments the power to implement urban plans and to pass district zoning bylaws.¹¹ The following year, Vancouver City Council created the Town Planning Commission. The Commission drafted comprehensive urban development plans for the city in 1928 and 1929.¹² These plans, however, did not specifically focus on the Downtown Eastside. The character of Strathcona as a commercial/light industrial/residential area had been established and continued to develop.¹³

Vancouver urban planning increased after WWII. Historian Jill Wade describes how growing immigration to Vancouver, post-war demobilization, and the



Captain George Vancouver points towards the Downtown Eastside on the cover of an early Vancouver Town Planning Commission report.

Source: Vancouver Town Planning Commission, "A Preliminary Report upon Economic Background and Population" (St. Louis: Harland Bartholomew and Associates, 1944).



In the 1940s, civic officials viewed Strathcona as a slum area in need of demolition and reconstruction.

Source: Leonard C. Marsh, "Rebuilding A Neighbourhood: Report on a Demonstration Slum-Clearance and Urban Rehabilitation Project in a Key Central Area in Vancouver" (Vancouver: University of British Columbia, 1950).

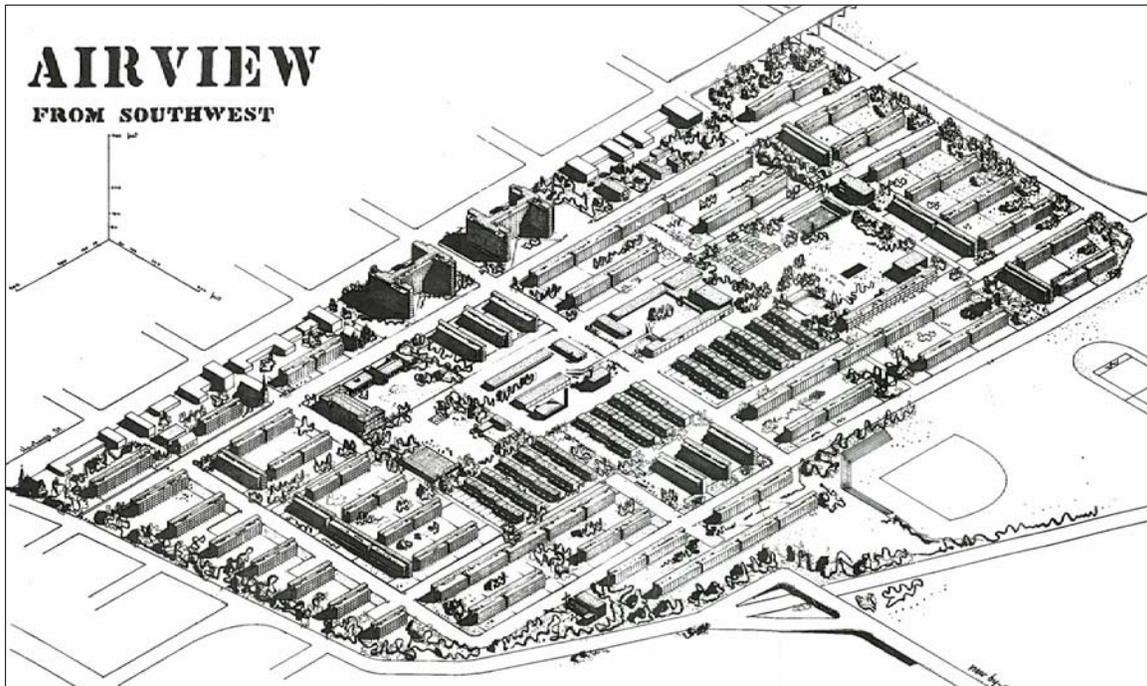
deterioration of earlier housing stock spurred greater interest in the creation of residential development projects.¹⁴ The Downtown Eastside's

emerging reputation as a slum district made it an especially attractive target for redevelopment. As Roy notes, "Civic officials, church leaders, social scientists, town planners, and the press from the 1940s on warned of the urgent need to clear Strathcona's slums to prevent the spread of blight and social problems."¹⁵ Initial plans to redevelop the area were thus modeled on the view that adverse physical conditions were conducive to urban decay and social problems, and impediments to Vancouver's development.

On October 31 1944, the Commission released a report updating and revising the earlier 1929 city plan. Their report, "A Preliminary Report upon Economic Background and Population Growth," stressed the need for town

planning to address Vancouver's growing population needs. It also specifically warned of the potential for urban decay amid haphazard urban growth.¹⁶ The Commission issued a second report in August 1948 detailing an administration strategy for the revised town plan.¹⁷

In 1950, University of British Columbia social planner Leonard C. Marsh released a study proposing the wholesale demolition and reconstruction of the Strathcona district. Marsh's report, "Rebuilding a Neighbourhood: Report on a Demonstration Slum-Clearance and Urban Rehabilitation Project in a Key Central Area in Vancouver," described East End housing conditions as "intolerable," and "dangerous for health, morale, and the spread of blight."¹⁸ Marsh advocated the clearance of Strathcona's



Marsh's 1950 study advocated the large scale redevelopment of Vancouver's Strathcona area. The plan proposed new traffic routes, tree belts, and a combination of apartments, single suites, and row houses.

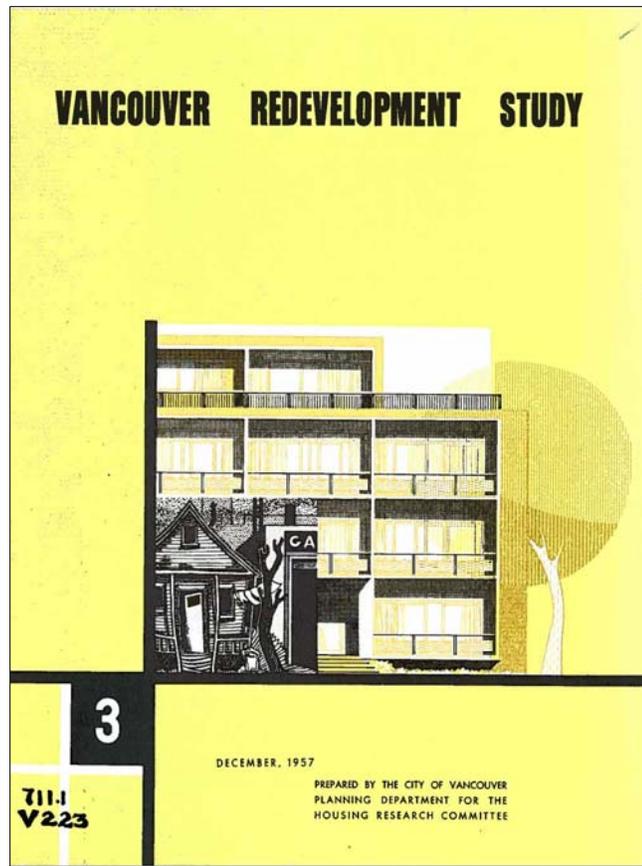
Source: Marsh, "Rebuilding A Neighbourhood."

"slums" and comprehensive redevelopment of about forty Downtown Eastside blocks. Reconstruction," he explained, "is the only answer to conditions such as have been described."¹⁹

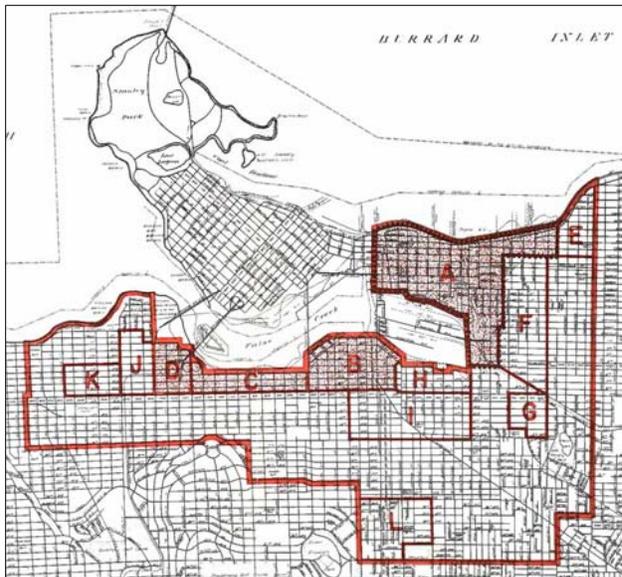
Following the release of the Marsh report, the city of Vancouver began working to develop its own urban renewal plan for the Downtown Eastside. The city created the Technical Planning Board to coordinate new planning initiatives. The Board drafted a twenty-year development plan for downtown Vancouver which City Council approved in principle in April 1955.²⁰ Representatives from the city, provincial government, and Central Housing and Mortgage and Housing Corporation also went on to form the Housing Research Committee. In 1957, the Committee published the "Vancouver Redevelopment Study." Like the earlier Marsh report, the study framed Downtown

Eastside areas as suffering from urban decay.²¹ The 1957 report proposed sweeping changes to the areas adjacent to False Creek including expropriation, demolition, and a combination of new public housing, private development, and new industrial uses.²² Vancouver City Council approved the study recommendations in 1958.

The Redevelopment Project mobilized an opposition movement among Downtown Eastside citizens and property owners. Historian Wing Chung Ng notes how Chinatown area residents were among the first and most active resisters to the plan. Community organizations, including the Chinese Benevolent Association and the Chinatown Property Owners Association, argued that the project would negatively impact local residents and businesses, and erode



Above: The cover of the 1957 “Vancouver redevelopment Study” juxtaposes a modern apartment complex with a derelict Strathcona single family dwelling.



Left: A map from the “Vancouver Redevelopment Study.” The areas shaded red, including much of the Downtown Eastside, were slated for comprehensive redevelopment.

Source: City of Vancouver, City of Vancouver Planning Department for the Housing Research Committee, “Vancouver Redevelopment Study” (Vancouver: City of Vancouver, 1957).

the unique culture and heritage of Chinatown.²³ Local efforts to stop redevelopment, however, enjoyed at best moderate successes during this time. Six predominantly residential blocks of the Downtown Eastside were acquired and cleared.²⁴

In the mid-1960s, conflict over the area’s future escalated. In 1965, Vancouver City Council initiated a second urban renewal project proposing the comprehensive

redevelopment of the Downtown Eastside.²⁵ The project resulted in the displacement of 1,730 people and clearance of twenty-nine acres.²⁶ In 1966, the civic government also endorsed a modernization program involving the redevelopment of the Gastown area. “Project 200,” a thirty-year, \$275 million private development initiative, proposed the erection of office towers, malls and retail shopping areas, and parking lots in the waterfront area between Howe St. and Abbott St.²⁷ In 1967 and 1968, discussions for a third urban renewal scheme began.

Community opposition to urban renewal grew throughout this period. In late-1968, local area residents formed the Strathcona Property Owners and Tenants Association. A cross-cultural coalition composed of local Chinese and non-Chinese residents, the Association worked alongside other community and social activists to prevent the large scale redevelopment of the region. Full implementation of third urban renewal plan was stayed in 1969 but not before an additional fifteen blocks of houses were cleared displacing 3,300 people.²⁸

Never fully implemented, the urban renewal plans of the 1950s and 60s failed to radically transform the landscape of the Downtown Eastside. Rather, redevelopment plans helped to mobilize local opposition to redevelopment and gentrification, forcing

governments to reassess their approach. In 1969, for example, Vancouver City Council created the Strathcona Working Committee, composed of both government and community representatives. The Committee endorsed rehabilitation planning aimed at area rejuvenation, rather than wholesale reconstruction.

Downtown Eastside community activism only grew in the 1970s. Ng notes how the Strathcona Property Owners and Tenants Association and local Chinese organizations successfully prevented the construction of freeways in the area in 1970 and 1973.²⁹ The Downtown Eastside Residents’ Association was also created in 1973 as an attempt to improve safety and living standards in the area. The Association also campaigned to replace the region’s Skid Row label with the less pejorative Downtown Eastside.³⁰

According to *City Magazine* editor Kent Gerecke, the Downtown Eastside Residents’ Association has enjoyed phenomenal success, “taking the most neglected area of the city and making the largest gains in community improvement of anywhere in the country.”³¹



The cover of an issue of the *Downtown Eastside Residents’ Association Newsletter*. Published in both English and Chinese, the newsletter helped to mobilize community activism throughout the DTES.

Source: *Downtown Eastside Residents’ Association Newsletter* (May 1983).

RECENT REVITALIZATION EFFORTS

During the 1980s and 1990s, the Downtown Eastside gained even more notoriety as a haven for social and economic problems. A population of heroin- and crack cocaine-dependent people moved into the region. Crime increased, along with prostitution, unemployment, homelessness, and intravenous drug-related diseases such as hepatitis and HIV-AIDS. Businesses, such as the Woodward's department store, closed or left the area, hastening the area's downward spiral.³² In his 2003 study of Vancouver urban planning, geographer John Punter describes the Downtown Eastside as being in a state of deep crisis since the 1980s and home to "a concentration of social problems arguably unequalled anywhere else in Canada."³³

During the mid-1990s Vancouver's municipal government began to address the area's growing problems. In 1995, City Council created the Vancouver Caucus to discuss approaches to managing the area. Two years later, the City created the Vancouver Coalition for Crime Prevention and Drug Treatment (now called the Four Pillars Coalition) to develop a strategic program. In 2001, City Council adopted as policy the "Four Pillars Approach to Drug Problems in Vancouver."³⁴ Innovative measures have since been undertaken to curb and control drug use in the Downtown Eastside, such as the creation of a needle exchange program, safe injection site, and detoxification facility.

Other municipal initiatives focusing on Downtown Eastside improvements include the 1998 adoption of a Strategic Action Plan and 1999 creation of the Downtown Eastside Revitalization Program, whose goal is "to create a safe and healthy community" in the Downtown Eastside.³⁵ From 1999-2004, Vancouver City Council, alongside the Vancouver Coalition for Crime Prevention and Drug Treatment, also implemented a Downtown Eastside Community Development Program designed to improve public safety.³⁶



The intersection of Hastings and Main St. is the location of the Carnegie Center: Vancouver's first public library. In the 1980s and 1990s, Hastings and Main became a symbol of the Downtown Eastside's visible drug use, health problems, prostitution, and poverty.

Source: Wikipedia, "Downtown Eastside," http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Downtown_Eastside (Accessed 21 October 2008).

A significant step towards Downtown Eastside revitalization occurred in March 2000 with the Vancouver Agreement. Signed by representatives from all three levels of government, the Agreement “provides for the future adoption of focuses for action through consultative processes.” The Vancouver Agreement’s first focus, included as part of the agreement itself, is “to create a healthy, safe, and sustainable community in the Downtown Eastside of Vancouver.”³⁷ The Agreement was renewed for a second five-year term in 2005.

The Vancouver Agreement advocates principles the principles of strategic planning, sustainable local economic development, heritage site preservation, and community and shareholder consultations.³⁸ Revitalization efforts are ongoing under both this and other related initiatives. In September 2004, for example, plans to develop the former Woodward’s building site were approved after lengthy debate and consultation.³⁹ The creation of market and non-market housing units, commercial shops, a post-secondary education facility, and public green space are all part of the plan.⁴⁰ Project construction began in 2006 and is scheduled to conclude in 2009.

Although governments and community advocacy groups generally agree on the need to improve social and economic conditions in the Downtown Eastside, recent revitalization efforts continue to be a source of conflict. Anthropologists Leslie Robertson and Dara Culhane describe the Downtown Eastside as a battleground where competing interest groups, community organizations, corporations, and individuals vie for power and control of the region’s future and public representation.⁴¹ Despite the Vancouver Agreement’s stipulation that revitalization efforts include the maintenance and upgrading of a diversity of housing so that local residents are not displaced from the Downtown Eastside, some community groups question whether revitalization can occur without significant displacement. Others, such as Jeff Sommers, contend that recent events have only exacerbated inequities within the Downtown Eastside and deepened the marginalization of the area’s less-privileged residents.⁴²

The Vancouver Agreement: Downtown Eastside Strategy Objectives

- Create a community in which people can live, work visit, and do business, while promoting and supporting positive linkages with neighbouring communities
- Help people gain access to affordable and safe housing and take advantage of job opportunities
- Support heritage and cultural development
- Create sustainable economic growth and community health
- Create a framework for women and men to influence decisions that affect them

Source: “The Vancouver Agreement: An Urban Development Agreement between Canada – British Columbia – Vancouver regarding Economic and Social and Community Development in the City of Vancouver [signed 9 March 2000],”

<http://vancouver.ca/commsvcs/planning/dtes/pdf/va.pdf> (Accessed 22 October 2008).

CONCLUSION

While revitalization efforts mark a continuation of attempts to transform Vancouver's Downtown Eastside begun in the 1950s, recent redevelopment efforts differ significantly from earlier urban renewal designs. Planning aimed at improving conditions within the Downtown Eastside has replaced demolition and reconstruction projects long rejected by local community organizations.

As efforts to revive the area continue, an independent 2006 report by Coyne and Associates, "Ripples of Change: Community Capacity in Vancouver's Downtown Eastside," summarizes the changes taking place as the area. The report notes that while recent revitalization efforts have produced "ripples of change," sustainable community development and capacity building remain challenges for the Downtown Eastside as it moves into the twenty-first century.⁴³

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- ¹ City of Vancouver, "Downtown Eastside Revitalization Neighbourhoods," <http://vancouver.ca/commsvcs/planning/dtes/> (accessed 26 August 2008).
- ² City of Vancouver, "Downtown Eastside Revitalization," <http://vancouver.ca/commsvcs/planning/dtes/neighbourhoods.htm> (accessed 14 August 2008).
- ³ See John Atkin, "Strathcona," in *The Greater Vancouver Book*, Chuck Davis, ed. (Surrey, BC: Linkman Press, 1997), 86.
- ⁴ Leslie Stephenson and Dara Culhane, eds., *In Plain Sight: Reflections on Life in Downtown Eastside Vancouver* (Vancouver: Talonbooks, 2005), 15.
- ⁵ Patricia E. Roy, *Vancouver: An Illustrated History* (Toronto: James Lorimer & Co., 1980), 30.
- ⁶ Nicholas Blomley, *Unsettling the City: Urban Land and the Politics of Property* (New York: Routledge, 2004), 34.
- ⁷ City of Vancouver, "Community History," <http://vancouver.ca/commsvcs/planning/dtes/communityhistory.htm> (Accessed 22 October 2008).
- ⁸ Roy, *Vancouver*, 150; Blomley, *Unsettling the City*, 34.
- ⁹ Jeff Sommers and Nick Blomley, "'The Worst Block in Vancouver,'" in Stan Douglas, *Every Building on 100 West Hastings* (Vancouver: Arsenal Pulp Press, 2002), 30.
- ¹⁰ Libby Davies, "Forward," in *Hope in Shadow: Stories and Photographs of Vancouver's Downtown Eastside*, eds. Brad Cran and Gillian Jerome (Vancouver: Arsenal Pulp Press, 2008), 12.
- ¹¹ S.B.C., 1925, c.55.
- ¹² See Vancouver Town Planning Commission, *A Plan for the City of Vancouver British Columbia* (Vancouver: Town Planning Commission, 1928); Vancouver Town Planning Commission, *A Plan for the City of Vancouver British Columbia including Point Grey and South Vancouver and General Plan of the Region, 1929* (Vancouver: Town Planning Commission, 1929).
- ¹³ Larry I. Bell, "The Strathcona Rehabilitation Project: Documentation and Analysis" (Vancouver: Social Policy and Research, United Way of Greater Vancouver, 1975), 5.
- ¹⁴ See Jill Wade, *Houses for All: The Struggle for Social Housing in Vancouver, 1919-50* (Vancouver: University of British Columbia Press, 1994), 93-161.
- ¹⁵ Roy, *Vancouver*, 144.
- ¹⁶ See Vancouver Town Planning Commission, "A Preliminary Report upon Economic Background and Population" (St. Louis: Harland Bartholomew and Associates, 1944).
- ¹⁷ See Vancouver Town Planning Commission, "A Preliminary Report upon Administration of the Plan" (St. Louis: Harland Bartholomew and Associates, 1948).
- ¹⁸ Leonard C. Marsh, "Rebuilding A Neighbourhood: Report on a Demonstration Slum-Clearance and Urban Rehabilitation Project in a Key Central Area in Vancouver" (Vancouver: University of British Columbia, 1950), iii, vii.
- ¹⁹ Marsh, "Rebuilding A Neighbourhood," 35.
- ²⁰ City of Vancouver, Technical Planning Board, "Downtown Vancouver 1955-1976" (Vancouver: Technical Planning Board, 1956).
- ²¹ City of Vancouver, City of Vancouver Planning Department for the Housing Research Committee, "Vancouver Redevelopment Study" (Vancouver: City of Vancouver, 1957).
- ²² John Gutstein, *Vancouver Ltd.* (Toronto: James Lorimer & Company, 1975), 157.
- ²³ Wing Ching Ng, *The Chinese in Vancouver, 1945-80: The Pursuit of Identity and Power* (Vancouver: University of British Columbia Press, 1999), 97-98; "Chinese Property Owner's Association to City Council, 11 October 1962," in City of Vancouver, Technical Planning Board, "City of Vancouver Redevelopment: Project No. 2" (July 1963), 91-94.
- ²⁴ Larry I. Bell, "The Strathcona Rehabilitation Project: Documentation and Analysis" (Vancouver: Social Policy and Research, United Way of Greater Vancouver, 1975), 8.
- ²⁵ City of Vancouver, Technical Planning Board, "City of Vancouver Redevelopment: Project No. 2."
- ²⁶ Gutstein, *Vancouver Ltd.*, 158.
- ²⁷ Keith Bradbury and George Peloquin, *Vancouver Sun*, 28 June 1966, "\$275 Million Project Unveiled," 1.
- ²⁸ Gutstein, *Vancouver Ltd.*, 159-161; Ng, *The Chinese in Vancouver*, 99.
- ²⁹ Ng, *The Chinese in Vancouver*, 108, 108 f.n. 14.

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- ³⁰ The responsibilities of the Downtown Eastside Residents' Association and Strathcona Property Owners and Tenants Association grew to include the management of low-income housing units. See Ng, *The Chinese in Vancouver*, 108; "DERA Buys the Metropole Hotel," *DERA Newsletter* (August, 1998), 3; Kent Gerecke, "Success in Revitalizing the Inner City – The Story of DERA," in *City Magazine* Vol. 12 No. 4 (1991), 15-16.
- ³¹ Gerecke, "Success in Revitalizing the Inner City," 11.
- ³² Reid Shier, "Introduction," in Stan Douglas, *Every Building on 100 West Hastings* (Vancouver: Arsenal Pulp Press, 2002), 14; John Punter, *The Vancouver Achievement: Urban Planning and Design* (Vancouver: University of British Columbia Press, 2003), 276.
- ³³ Punter, *The Vancouver Achievement*, 283.
- ³⁴ "A Framework for Action: A Four Pillar Approach to Drug Problems in Vancouver: A Report Prepared by Donald MacPherson, Drug Policy Coordinator (2001)," <http://vancouver.ca/fourpillars/pdf/Framework.pdf> (Accessed 22 October 2008). The Agreement entrenches the four working principles of prevention, treatment, enforcement, and harm reduction.
- ³⁵ City of Vancouver, "Administrative Report, Downtown Eastside Community Revitalization Program Interim Report, 1 February 2000," <http://vancouver.ca/ctyclerk/ccclerk/000201/a7.htm> (Accessed 22 October 2008).
- ³⁶ City of Vancouver, "Downtown Eastside Crime Prevention/Community Development Project," <http://vancouver.ca/COMMSVCS/PLANNING/dtes/project.htm> (Accessed 21 October 2008).
- ³⁷ "The Vancouver Agreement: An Urban Development Agreement between Canada – British Columbia – Vancouver regarding Economic and Social and Community Development in the City of Vancouver [signed 9 March 2000]," <http://vancouver.ca/commsvcs/planning/dtes/pdf/va.pdf> (Accessed 22 October 2008).
- ³⁸ See "The Vancouver Agreement," 2-3.
- ³⁹ John Bermingham, *Province*, 24 September 2004, "Still much to Argue Over as Woodward's Design Picked," A5.
- ⁴⁰ City of Vancouver, "Woodward's Development Proposal," <http://vancouver.ca/corpsvcs/realestate/woodwards/proposal.htm> (accessed 12 August 2008); City of Vancouver, "Woodward's Project Timeline," <http://vancouver.ca/corpsvcs/realestate/woodwards/timeline.htm> (accessed 25 August 2008).
- ⁴¹ Stephenson and Culhane, *In Plain Sight*, 19.
- ⁴² See Jeff Sommers, "Beyond the Collar of Blight," *West Coast Line* Vol. 37 No. 2/3 (2004).
- ⁴³ Coyne and Associates. "Ripples of Change: Community Capacity in Vancouver's Downtown Eastside" (Vancouver: Coyne and Associates, 2006), 2-3.