

# *Old Vancouver*

## *Vancouver's Heritage*

### ***Profile of the Downtown Eastside***

**Presentation by *Ray Spaxman***  
***The Future of Old Vancouver***  
***March 19, 2009***



The purpose of this presentation is to encourage discussion about the future of the Downtown Eastside. About a year ago, concerned about what I considered to be the ever worsening conditions in the area, I decided to investigate the situation and see if I could do anything to help. Following a year of research, I have become impressed about the enormous resources being applied by so many dedicated people to the area and the problems it is facing. Yet, despite all this effort, and while there are some measurable improvements in some of the conditions, my impression is that the overall situation is getting worse.

I am beginning to believe that substantial progress will only occur when an holistic approach is taken, when the local community is fully engaged in a comprehensive community planning program and when the implementation of a coordinated program of action occurs. Of course such a process is complex and difficult. Many will find it easier to continue to pursue those matters where they are most comfortable and, while that is helpful, it will not bring the overall improvement that most people want to see.

This report is a work in progress and I will continue to develop it. I welcome comments so that the contents can improve in response to the discussion that ensues. I have discovered the following so far.

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One hundred years ago the Downtown Eastside was the core of a new, thriving, optimistic, entrepreneurial, tough, diverse and creative community. This is where Vancouver was born and over the years it developed into our most important heritage precinct. It contains a wealth of special physical, social and economic legacies. There are many areas of historic residential, commercial and industrial buildings, several creative artistic communities, and several distinctive and characterful neighbourhoods.

While many of the good features of that heritage remain today they are being usurped by the impacts of years of inappropriate government policies.

Those policies have allowed the area to become overwhelmed by people with severe addiction and mental health illnesses, homelessness, poverty and by crime. It is now identified by many as the worst slum in Canada.

Most people are concerned to see the Downtown Eastside repaired and flourishing again. Some of us see in that future a strong, supportive, diverse community that is unique in its character from other communities. It is perhaps grittier and more urban than other communities, and is a community that is tolerant, as it always has been, to a broad diversity of people.

I have been involved with the Downtown Eastside for over 35 years. I was Director of City Planning between 1973 and 1989 and the Spaxman Consulting Group produced the "Gastown Heritage Management Plan" in 2002, and co-authored the "Historic Precinct Height Study" for the City in 2008.

However, towards the end of 2008, as I became more and more disturbed by what I believe to be a disaster happening in the Downtown Eastside, I decided to become better informed about the conditions in the Downtown Eastside especially about addictions, mental health, poverty, homelessness and crime, and see if I could help in any way.

I want to share with you the results of my work to date and some proposals about what we can do about the area. I have learned so much in the last twelve months from discussions with people dealing with health, heritage, housing, homelessness, emergency shelters, and addictions, and with people in government, policing, the arts, business, development, academia, and from members of the community and my colleagues on the Building Community Society.

### **Being Holistic**

There are enormous amounts of energy and resources being distributed across the Downtown Eastside, yet, without a coordinated, participatory and holistic view of the issues, the pieces will never come together and enable the community to find a long-term solution. We need to build the capacity to create a description of that view. It should be drawn up in a manner that provides an holistic picture that is as clear and accessible to as many people as possible in order to encourage the broadest understanding and participation.



### The Place

The Downtown Eastside consists of a number of distinct and easily identifiable neighbourhoods – Gastown, Chinatown, Strathcona and Oppenheimer. Victory Square has also been identified as a neighbourhood and Hastings Street is a particularly important commercial street that runs through the area and connects with all these neighbourhoods. The area is generally bounded by Richards Street to the west, Clark Drive to the east, Burrard Inlet to the north and False Creek to the south.

### Characteristics

At this time the area has two contrasting characteristics, a positive one and a negative one.

The positive one is derived from a number of features concerned with heritage, arts and culture, the sense of community and a tolerance and acceptance of the different circumstances of the residents.



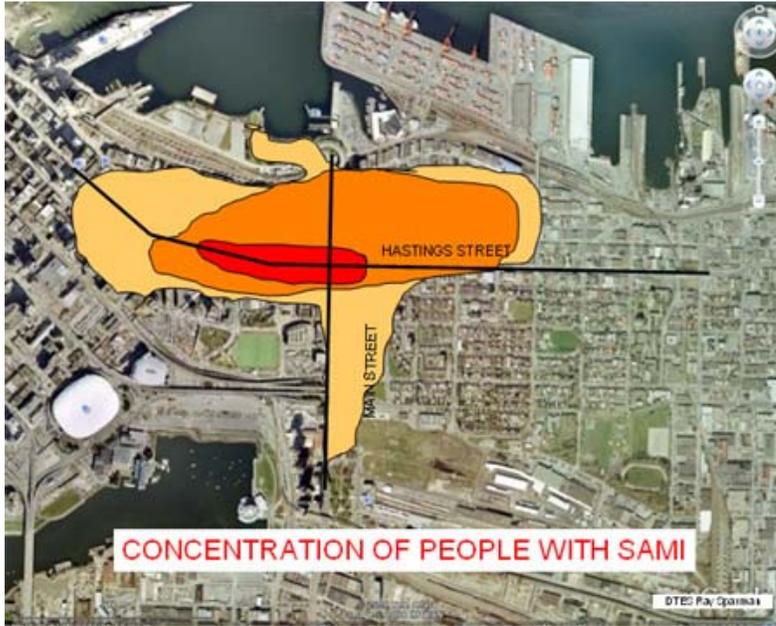
The negative features are primarily the results of the absence of effective government policies to handle the many people who are seriously affected by addiction and mental illnesses and the related poverty, homelessness, and crime.



The Downtown Eastside is predominantly characterized by a concentration of people with "Serious Addiction and Mental Illnesses".



The following map shows the readily apparent concentration of these people in the area especially along Hastings Street. Also concentrated in the area are the services, housing and shelters for this population.

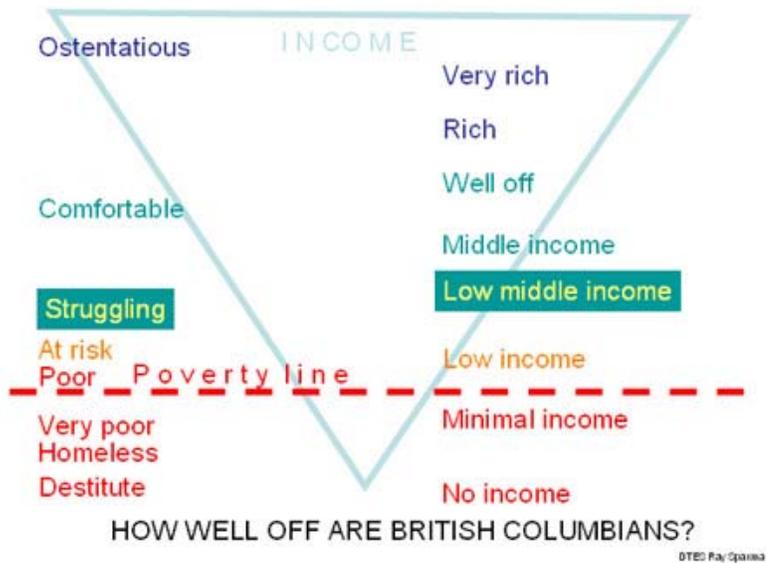


Even so, the insufficiency of those services and of safe and comfortable housing is apparent from the number of homeless people on the street. The preponderance of addicts and the mentally ill, and the drug dealers on the street, as well as the concentration of criminal activity in the area, all create an environment that would be unacceptable anywhere else. I think it is a disaster, but somehow or another it exists and seems to be getting worse.

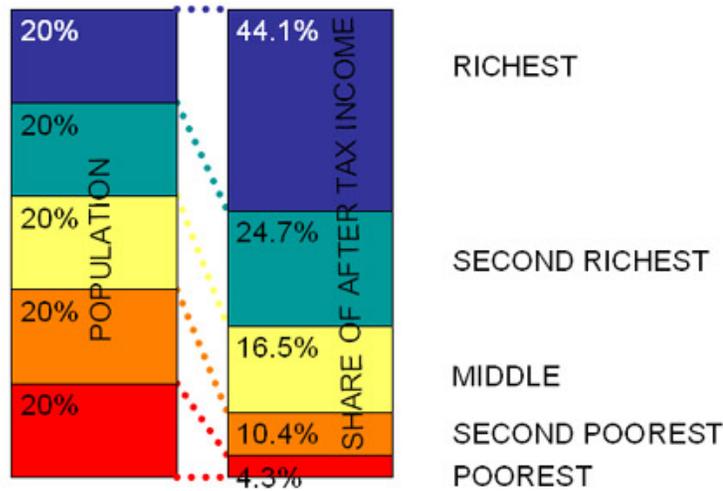
**The Resident Population**

The area is home for some 16,000 people, 12,000 or so are low income.

Many of these low-income people are those who suffer from severe alcohol and drug addictions and mental illness. They are the people who were returned to the community over the last twenty years as older institutions, like Riverview, were de-institutionalized, but without the provision of the support services that they desperately need.



The issue of poverty is not a new phenomenon but its prominence in our modern, seemingly wealthy society, is disturbing. The diagram above shows a description of income distribution and the following diagram shows the statistical version of the same information. The top 20% of the population of BC has 44% of the after taxes income while the lowest 20% has 4%.



### HOW WELL OFF ARE BRITISH COLUMBIANS?

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These diagrams raise a host of questions ranging from the concern, especially in Canada's wealthiest city, about the widening gap between the rich and the poor, how workers at the minimum wage of \$8/hr can survive, and how those on welfare, at \$610 a month, can live anywhere or have sufficient left for food and personal necessities, when the cheapest, single occupancy room costs \$375.

#### Drug Statistics

The Downtown Eastside is home for thousands of intravenous drug and crack users. 4,000 addicts receive prescription methadone. The Hastings Street supervised injection site, (Insite), has 600 visits each day – estimated to be only 5% of all injections each day in the Downtown Eastside. Insite distributes over 2 million syringes annually and costs \$3 million per year to operate.

#### Homelessness

There are estimated to be over 700 homeless people in the Downtown Eastside. Most of them can now find a space in a shelter at night or find a friend who will put them up. The remainder will sleep under a bridge, at the side of the street, in an alcove or wherever. Some prefer to sleep outside as some shelters are unclean, (bed bugs, rats, etc.), or unsafe, (drugs, gangs and other predators). Most of the homeless are suffering from severe addiction and mental illnesses.

#### Dozens of Agencies

There are dozens of agencies concerned with health, addictions, housing, homelessness, food, arts culture, employment and community programs.

There are also numerous provincial and municipal programs focused on housing, planning, policing, building and law enforcement and health problems. In February, the Globe and Mail estimated that over \$1.5 billion had been spent on the Downtown Eastside since 2002, and the Province newspaper said expenditures amount to \$1million a day.

#### Costs of Homelessness

A major research program commissioned by the province of BC and undertaken by the Faculty of Health Sciences at SFU, concluded in early 2008, "The homeless person costs the public significantly more in servicing costs than the cost of providing adequate and supportive housing." The study found that each homeless person costs about \$55,000 per annum in health care, prison and emergency shelter. Supportive housing would cost \$37,000 per person/per annum, or \$18,000 per annum less.

Recently, Alberta's conservative government acknowledged these potential savings and instituted a new "Housing First" program to provide significant amounts of supportive housing, and allocated \$3.3 million over the next decade.

#### Recommended Actions

The previously referenced SFU report set out a number of recommendations to deal

with the issues. These recommendations echo what many others, who are knowledgeable about the issues associated with drugs and homelessness, believe and support. Ten of them are listed here.

1. Provide coordinated leadership.
2. Build permanent supported housing.
3. Provide Assertive Community Treatment teams.
4. Attend to special aboriginal needs.
5. Provide integrated health services.
6. Improve income assistance.
7. Include corrections services on Assertive Community Treatment teams.
8. Provide affordable housing.
9. Improve landlord and tenant support services.
10. Develop community and political understanding of issues and solutions.

While progress is being made on some of these recommendations, a much more vigorous implementation program is needed across all the recommendations to have a real impact.

### **And There are Many Other Issues to Be Considered**

Remember we are dealing with a specific place: A place that was developed over many years as the commercial centre of Vancouver. Recent years have seen large portions of the Downtown Eastside deteriorate as the impact of the expanding drug market took over the core of the area, with an alarming increase in the number of derelict properties. However, the area contains a large number of heritage properties, very few vacant sites, a substantial resident community, established businesses and industries, and an established street and building framework.

While much attention has recently been given to the redevelopment of the Downtown Eastside, and individual programs concentrate on providing a range of housing and support services, we have to attend to the following questions.

- How much housing of what sort and for whom, is needed?
- Where shall we put that housing and what should it look like?
- What height and density of buildings are appropriate?
- What services, open spaces and community facilities will future populations need, and where should they be located?
- Will new commercial and industrial space be needed and where should that be located?
- How much will this cost, how will it be paid for and who will pay?
- AND, most importantly, how can this all be integrated into a vibrant and livable community?

### **How Are We Going to Answer These Questions?**

#### **We Must Do Some Planning**

And to do that we must remember that it involves three primary components.

1. We have to plan for the physical/environmental future including built form, infrastructure, open space and development processes.



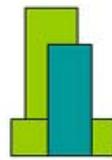
**Physical  
Environmental**

Built form, urban infrastructure,  
transportation, open space,  
development,



DTEC Plan Sparrow

2. We have to give consideration to economic and financial matters, including business and finance, employment, investment and development incentives.



**Physical  
Environmental**

Built form, urban infrastructure,  
transportation, open space,  
development,

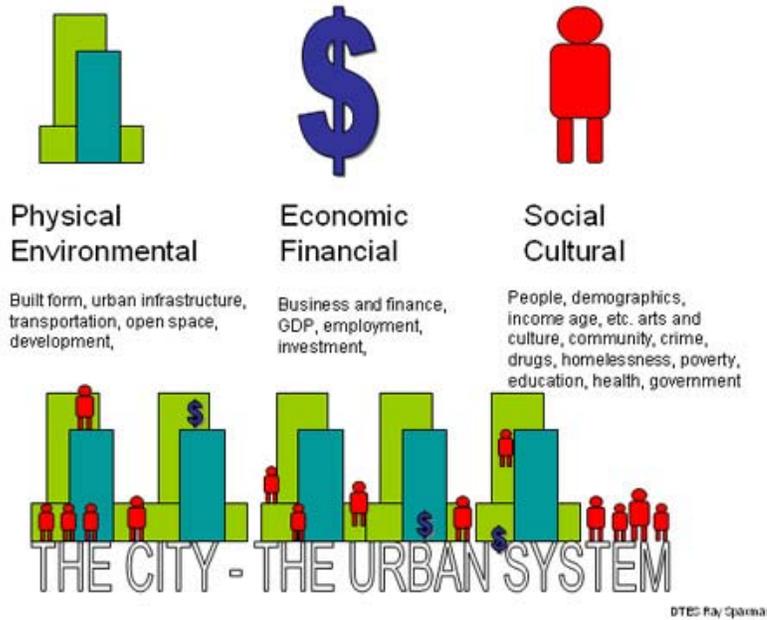
**Economic  
Financial**

Business and finance,  
GDP, employment,  
investment,



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3. And thirdly we have to have regard for the social and cultural elements of the place. This includes the people, their pursuits and needs, the arts, and social and governmental organizations.



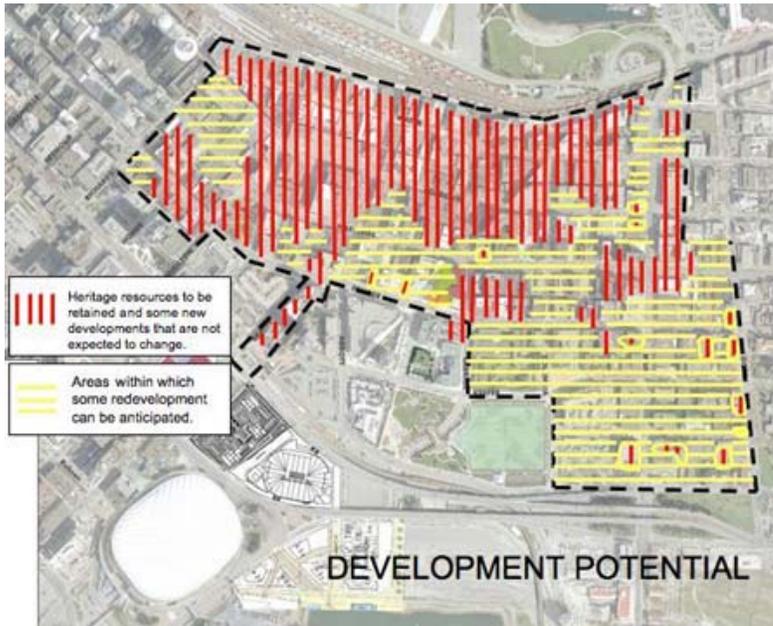
To create a sustainable future we must consider the environmental, economic and social components of the urban system as an integrated whole.

We also have to be well informed about the circumstances that already exist. We need to know how the area operates as part of the urban system. Some examples are described, as follows.



**Area Plans**

The map above shows the status of official city planning policies for the Downtown Eastside. There is no overall vision or set of policies for the area. While many communities of the City of Vancouver have been through a thorough, community led visionary planning process this has not occurred for the Downtown Eastside. However, Gastown and Victory Square do have official plans and the City has been working with the Chinatown community for many years and is about to publish the plan for Chinatown. The whitened areas in the attached diagram illustrate those areas where one may conclude a level of confidence in the plan while the un-whitened areas are more open for reconsideration. The area to the east of Main Street is without an up-to-date plan. The residents and business owners in those areas are developing their own plans and Strathcona has publicized a draft plan for consideration by the community and City Council.



**Redevelopment Opportunities**

The map above shows that within Chinatown, Gastown and Victory Square there are significant areas where future redevelopment can be anticipated. The soon-to-be-released city study on potential redevelopment in these areas will shed more light on this.



**Generalized Land Use**

The map above illustrates a very preliminary land use map of the area, which warrants detailed review and correction. It is also important to describe the many activities that occur within these uses so we know how they can contribute to future planning and how new development can be added to, or replace them.



### Local Organizations

The map above identifies some of the numerous agencies operating throughout the area. It will be important to know what type of service they operate, for whom and so on.

### Growth Potential

The Downtown Eastside has been identified by some as the next area of redevelopment now that the Downtown has been nearly fully developed. This is a highly contentious issue in the Downtown Eastside. Some see this as favorable gentrification, others as the destruction of the predominantly low-income community. This issue has to be addressed through a local area planning process. As well, we should be looking at the whole inner east side to see how long term future growth can be accommodated. Perhaps there is more capacity for growth east of the historic precinct than within it.

### Okay, So How Should We Plan?

Ideally it is a process that engages all stakeholders in studying, visioning, and recommending what can be done to achieve a desired future for the area. Central to this exercise, of course, are the local residents and business people. They, working with the advice and assistance of the many agencies and organizations that service the Downtown Eastside, will need to seek consensus about the directions to take.

*The features that guide such a process are listed here:*

1. Be community based.
2. Be representative of all parts of the community.
3. Be a public, participatory and transparent process.
4. Be well informed.
5. Be centred in a publicly accessible storefront where the information and issues being considered are displayed and where the discussions on the planning are held.

*The process to be followed would likely go through these steps:*

1. Develop an understanding of the issues that need to be addressed.
2. Develop ideas to deal with the issues and a vision of the future.
3. Seek consensus.
4. Propose plans and actions that represent the community's viewpoint, and
5. Recommend those plans and actions to City Council and other public and private implementers as and when appropriate.
6. Implement the plans, monitor progress and adjust to meet changing conditions.



**Achieving Agreement**

This diagram above illustrates that while it is impossible to achieve 100% agreement, it is possible to develop a plan through a democratic and thoughtful process that can find acceptance among the majority of the stakeholders.

The goal of course is to achieve agreement. However, the planning process has to recognize that there are always different values and needs involved. The process has to be led with considerable patience and understanding in order to achieve as much agreement as possible and to develop sufficient confidence among the participants that the process followed was fair and inclusive. In the end, especially in a diverse area such as the Downtown Eastside, there are likely to be viewpoints that do not agree with the majority view expressed in the recommended plan. It is important to thoroughly document all the main alternatives, before selecting the preferred one. The goal is to find common ground and a plan that most people can support.



**Who is the Community?**

The diagram above illustrates the special circumstances that characterize the Downtown Eastside community. Downtown east-siders are those people who live and work in the area. They are shown in the central part of the diagram. Serving the area in numerous ways are the government departments dealing with a host of services including, bylaw enforcement, planning, housing, health, justice and so on. Also serving the area are dozens of charitable, non-profit agencies providing a multiplicity of services.

While much of the work done by the agencies and governments is appreciated by the

Downtown Eastside residents and businesses, they do not want to be overwhelmed or disenfranchised by the size, authority and influence of these "outsiders".

### Thinking and Doing

The seriousness of the situation in the Downtown Eastside drives many people to demand that we stop talking and planning and take some action. As a colleague explained, when your house is on fire you rush to get buckets of water, not to meet with people to discuss how to make houses fireproof.

The scene in the Downtown Eastside is in fact one of hundreds of people acting in hundreds of ways "to put the fire out." Yet the fire continues to rage.

What another colleague advised is that we need two parallel and coordinated programs. One that coordinates the hundreds of actions that seem to be occurring in an uncoordinated fashion. And the other, to be a coordinated planning process to determine and agree a future for the area.

### The Downtown Eastside is a Window to the World

While this report focuses on what we can do in the Downtown Eastside, we must recognize that it is also a window on the global issues of addictive behaviours and mental illnesses. Some have argued that the long-term solution to these problems lies in the development of family values, strong communities and improved connections between people.

In the context that this is "a work in progress" and that we need to see the issues holistically, our model must include the issues related to the legalization/decriminalization of drugs.

### Conclusions

It seems obvious to me and many others that to deal effectively with serious addiction and mental health illnesses, poverty and homelessness, the following steps must be taken:

1. Provide Affordable Permanent Housing.
2. Provide Supported Permanent Housing.
3. Provide Integrated Health Services.
4. Improve Income Provisions. (Welfare and Minimum wage)
5. It is vital that we find a way to integrate all that into a viable and healthy community through a coordinated, participatory community planning process.
6. And, because governments seem not to understand the need, the urgency or the benefits, we all must work to inform and persuade them accordingly.



Hence my last diagram. It shows how the way we present our values for family and community, affected mightily by media and lobbyists, affects the political will. Politicians, being leaders and servants of the people reflect the people's wishes if the people make their wishes known and felt.

So everyone has to get involved in persuading the politicians to follow this course of action.

**To Remind You of My Purpose**

My purpose is to find a solution to what I have called the Downtown Eastside disaster.

This presentation is designed to support discussion about the Downtown Eastside for the purpose of improving our understanding of the issues and to develop support for actions that can build a vibrant and healthy community.