

Four blocks of Hope?

Vancouver's most socially afflicted neighbourhood was the subject of front-page news last week

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Property developer Marc Williams sounds more like a community activist when he starts talking about his company's plans to restore the historic Pantages Theatre at 150 East Hastings in the heart of Vancouver's hardest of hard-scrabble neighbourhoods.

On the worst block of East Hastings, Williams, with the Alberta-based firm Worthington Properties, talks about pouring some \$6 million into restoring the Pantages for use by the Vancouver Opera Company, the Carnegie Centre next door and other community groups.

Then Worthington would help finance the creation of 136 social-housing units in adjacent buildings to the west, an art gallery, cafe, community-group offices and leasable commercial space.

"After seeing what was going on [in the neighbourhood], and realizing the theatre was there, and seeing how positively it could impact the area . . . it certainly has had a profound effect on my outlook and my approach to doing business."

If Worthington can bring a proposal together, there would be neighbourhood employment in the gallery and cafe and opportunities to train disadvantaged community members during construction.

Williams's proposal is still a business bet, though. Worthington Properties would earn a so-called density bonus with the restoration that it could transfer to another site, allowing it to build a larger market-housing building than zoning normally allows.



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Property developer Marc Williams sounds more like a community activist when he starts talking about his company's plans to restore the historic Pantages Theatre at 150 East Hastings in the heart of Vancouver's hardest of hard-scrabble neighbourhoods.

It is an example, however, of how businesses are placing stakes on the area's future rather than abandoning Vancouver's toughest neighbourhood.

The City of Vancouver, in a recent report, characterized the four blocks surrounding East Hastings and Columbia Street as scene of "some of the most profound and concentrated public disorder" in the city.

Within the same four blocks, however, condominium-marketing-mogul Bob Rennie has bought the historic Wing Sang building on East Pender Street, Jameson Development Corp. is building the East complex of 22 luxury condominiums and movie producer William Vince has bought and restored buildings at the corner of East Cordova and Main Street to house his company, Infinity Features.

On the border of those four blocks, Milton Wong, chairman of HSBC Asset Management Canada, bought the old Chinese Freemasons Building at 5 West Pender, which is being turned into seniors' housing, The Salient Group is developing the Paris Block at 51 West Hastings and has several other proposals for redevelopment in nearby Gastown.

The neighbourhood is also a mere two blocks away from the massive, \$250-million Woodward's redevelopment, which is helping shape everything that is going on in the Downtown Eastside.

Developers, new residents and entrepreneurs are drawn to the neighbourhood for its heritage character and its diversity because of proximity to Chinatown, the Main Street corridor and Gastown.

No one is taking a Pollyannaish approach to the neighbourhood's problems with poverty, mental illness and drug addiction and so far everyone is sensitive to the city's goal of "revitalization without displacement," which aims to preserve places for low income residents.

Nathan Edelson, a senior planner with the City of Vancouver, said the city's heritage policy -- the one which Worthington could use to justify the Pantages restoration -- has helped to unleash some \$100 million in new investment in Gastown and Chinatown.

He added that the city considers the Woodward's redevelopment as the anchor project in revitalizing the Downtown Eastside, though consultants have warned city officials that there's "not going to be a tidal wave of development all the way down Hastings."

Change, however, is happening slowly. Edelson said the city has received 12 development applications on the so-called Carrall Street greenway alone, a plan to encourage heritage restoration between False Creek and the Burrard Inlet.

Edelson added that community leaders and private-sector investors with a stake in the neighbourhood, or interested in taking a stake in the neighbourhood, "are coming in a spirit of helping to revitalize the area, and

doing it with a sense of social responsibility."

Robert Fung, with The Salient Group, said density bonuses were used to build cultural venues in Yaletown and the southern downtown core, such as the Contemporary Art Gallery and Vancity Theatre.

"That model works for those things, one could ask why it couldn't work for social housing," Fung added.

"I'd say this is the time to recognize we need to be creative. There are certainly opportunities out there, and I think the development community and government are all ears [to figure out ways] to create the housing that will fill these gaps."

Fung added that an influx of new residents drawn by market-housing developments such as the East project, Salient Group's newly redeveloped Taylor Building, the Paris Block that it is building and projects in the Alhambra Building and Gaoler's Mews on Carrall are also an important part of the mix.

"The new population that is coming in made a conscious decision to move in there because they like the area," Fung said. "The incoming level of pride [they bring] is very important, and we're seeing the benefits of that in Gastown."

Fung added that he is drawn to the Downtown Eastside's heritage character, and the city's heritage policy, brought about thanks to the Vancouver agreement between the city, provincial and federal governments, helped encourage a lot of the development is going on.

"It's a dynamic working environment [and] it's a great place to live," Fung said.

Movie producer William Vince liked the neighbourhood's historical character, and he picked up two buildings for \$535,000 in May 2005 to house his business, Infinity Features. Some \$2 million later, Vince has hip offices in what he considers to be "the coolest part of town right now."

His end of Main has "individual stores with unique ideas and creative things, and Vancouver needs that."

Vince, who is in London working on a project, added that his big concern in coexisting with drug addicts and street people isn't safety, it's the litter they leave behind.

"I was in Glasgow the other day and felt more threatened than I do around my [Vancouver] office."

If anything, Vince believes Main Street should be "over-lit, over-cleaned and over-bannered so it's inviting for tourists," he said. "And if [tourists] meet someone with drug problems, that's fine, because they're not bad people, they're not threatening people."

Vince bought and renovated his property without any subsidies or agendas, and said he would prefer the city to stop talking about policies and start to "show forward motion" toward encouraging landlords to take pride in their properties.

"Show some pride," he said. "Put some money into the area so people can say 'I believe in the place.' "

There is still suspicion about developers' interest in the Downtown Eastside among community members.

Mark Townsend, a director of the Portland Hotel Society, a non-profit housing group, said the buying and selling of properties appears to be speculation on the part of developers looking to make a buck. He said property values have shot up in the neighbourhood, which would make it more difficult for groups like his to take on new projects, even if they had the money.

"No one was interested in this area five minutes ago," Townsend said. "Suddenly everybody's rushing down, and the only real reason is to make some money.

"It's depressing that people weren't interested before. Now that they are, I don't think it's right that they can just come and do what they want."

The Portland Hotel Society has just begun an \$11-million heritage restoration of the old Pennsylvania Hotel at 421 Carrall St., on the southeast corner of Hastings Street, which will include 43 units of social housing that will rent for \$325 a month.

Townsend said that project took five years to put together and involves financing from all three levels of government. Developers Concord Pacific also helped out by buying the Pennsylvania's density bonus, providing cash for its heritage restoration.

Townsend added that it was also helped by recent public pressure on governments about Vancouver's homelessness problem.

Milton Wong is another neighbourhood Downtown Eastside landlord having bought 5 West Pender, the building that housed his father's business, Modernize Tailors, for 50 years.

Wong said the community at large has a duty to develop a long-term strategy for dealing with Downtown Eastside's problems.

"Is it in despair? Yeah, I think it's pretty bad. . . . As a community, we should really be ashamed of it."

If the community can build a structure that deals with problems of drug addiction, homelessness and mental illness while treating people with dignity, "then I think that leads to a viable community."

"The other alternative is kicking people out of the area and just having middle-class people living there," Wong added. "That's not what I'd like to see."

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heritage buildings draw buyers to troubled area

Building: Pennsylvania Hotel

Address: 412 Carrall Street

Owner: Portland Hotel Society

Status: Under construction as an \$11-million social housing and heritage restoration project involving city, provincial and federal government participation.

Building: Pantages Theatre

Address: 150 East Hastings Street

Owner: Worthington Properties

Status: Worthington Properties is proposing to restore the historic vaudeville theatre and build 136 units of affordable social housing at 138, 134 and 130 East Hastings.

Building: Golden Harvest Theatre

Address: 319 Main Street

Owner: William Vince

Status: Restored, along with adjacent building at 323 Main Street as offices for William Vince's film company, Infinity Features.

Building: Chinese Freemasons Building

Address: 1 West Pender Street (off map)

Owner: Milton Wong

Status: Nearly complete seniors housing.

Building: The Wing Sang Building

Address: 51 East Pender

Owner: Bob Rennie

Status: Marketing mogul Bob Rennie bought the 117-year-old heritage building in 2004 for \$1 million, aiming to restore sections and rebuild the rest for office space and art gallery.

Address: 69 East Pender Street

Owner: Jameson Development Corp.

Status: Under construction as the East apartment building, 22 condominium flats.

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