

Gastown's message to the world

OPINION | **Densification, heritage preservation get along fine, developer says**

BY ROBERT FUNG
SPECIAL TO WESTCOAST HOMES

Last weekend the city of Vancouver's senior heritage planner, Gerry McGeough, and I led planners and government heritage representatives from around the world through Gastown.

Our purpose was to show how government support for heritage rehabilitation and public/private cooperation has resulted in an economic-development catalyst that is transforming some of Vancouver's infamous eyesores into a "sustainable urbanization" eye-opener.

Two very big words, and very hot if you're a planner or developer, sustainable urbanization has preoccupied hundreds of learned participants in the World Planner's Congress and the World Urban Forum in Vancouver.

Of the myriad topics for debate under this banner, one small component involves the integration of our historic fabric into densification.

What might this add to "sustainable urbanization"?

When land is at a premium, and densification is critical, why should we care to save small heritage buildings?

Further, why bother to save blocks of these derelict structures that comprise our currently most underdeveloped heritage neighbourhoods?

I believe a heritage component is

See **VANCOUVER SCHEME** L4
Bob Ransford, too, sees much to delight our earnest visitors, L2



Designer honoured with doctorate

Vancouver interior designer Robert Ledingham's title has been redecorated.

Like that perfect piece of artwork hung in a perfect room, the honorary distinction of 'doctor' was recently bestowed upon the long-time supplier of new-home design to the local development industry, by his alma mater, the University of Manitoba.

Works featured

On this page and on two more inside, new-construction commissions from this decade and from the previous are shown. The Del Prado commission (far left) was done in the 1990s; the Flagship show home (left), this year.

The projects' locations, the former in Yaletown, the latter on the old Expo lands, make Ledingham a distinctive contributor to the densification of downtown Vancouver.

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**Vancouver scheme
offsets challenges
of rehabilitation**

From LI

fundamental to the final outcome of this torrid pace of growth and to the preservation of our sense of who we are.

Vancouver is often seen as a desirable model for urban densification, with almost 85,000 people residing in the city core.

But even as the quest for developable high-rise sites continues to consolidate in Vancouver's traditional wholesale and light industrial areas of Downtown South and Yaletown, city hall has moved to ensure that the earliest and most often overlooked areas of our town are not lost to the voracious demands of this growth.

Last weekend, a group from the planner's congress took some time to learn about how a city's heritage legacy may figure into "sustainable urbanization" equation, and what might be done to bring government and the private sector together in this pursuit.

What was discussed signifies a desire to reduce government barriers and to shift from the "heritage fundamentalist" notion that reduces heritage buildings to virtual time-capsules. What was discussed looks to engage these buildings in the future, not just the past.

Trying to make old things new, especially when faced with the

enormous building code and policy shackles, is a burden. It is the reason that historically most Canadian heritage-rehabilitation projects have been institutional and were created to house government divisions of some sort.

Now there is a recognition that unless new construction and the original heritage fabric of a city can be knit together in a practical and relevant way, the blend can not succeed.

We may go through tremendous growth and change, but we know where we came from when we visit Gastown, Chinatown and Crosstown, the Victoria Square neighbourhood. The most deteriorated of all our neighbourhoods. Vancouver's social open-sore.

One might argue that by the year 2000, the centralization of non-market housing and social services into these areas, as well as turning a blind eye to the atrocities and quality of life in slum-lord-run rooming houses, created the blight that too many of us have turned our back on.

Faced not only with social conditions hitting rock bottom, but the potential loss of a large portion of a very small inventory of buildings that represent the architectural heritage of this town, city hall launched the "Gastown Heritage Management" plan.



Shown here in one of the lofts he recently introduced into a 100-year-old Beatty Street warehouse, Robert Fung reports that his Salient development group is now preparing to rehabilitate the Flack Block, an 1899 office building at Hastings and Cambie. 'Of special note is that the rehabilitated building will rank environmentally with a LEED 'silver' certification,' he reports. 'This will be achieved through a prudent mechanical and electrical design and the fact that reusing an existing structure inherently reduces the demolition volumes sent to the dump.'

It may turn out to be one of the most successful economic development programs in the city's history: It has helped generate close to \$500 million in new construction in the Downtown Eastside.

The program offers incentives to developers to rehabilitate older buildings and, further, it compensates developers for what they forego, in marketable square footage, because of the heritage encumbrance.

This process has been built on a level of trust and cooperation between city authorities and developers that is uncommon.

It relies on the creativity of both to make these projects work, and a flexibility in policy that, at times, stretches the bureaucratic blinders.

Don't for a second think that this program is a gift to developers.

It is an "earn-in" program, with incentives created to offset the challenges of re-using century-old building stock and making the interior spaces safe, liveable and looking like they were built yesterday, not yesteryear.

The developers involved are introducing new condos, office and retail space into the same neighbourhoods that we have been avoiding for years. Our past "mistake" of concentrating social housing in these areas, to the exclusion of all else, may ultimately protect

these neighbourhoods from American-style gentrification and displacement.

With the strength of an existing community, the Victorian, Edwardian and Moderne architecture of the past century, and a diversity and texture that can only be achieved through evolution and the passage of time, our heritage districts may have the potential to become, in many ways, our most sustainable.

The context and future architectural face of our city may come full circle, right back home to Gastown.

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