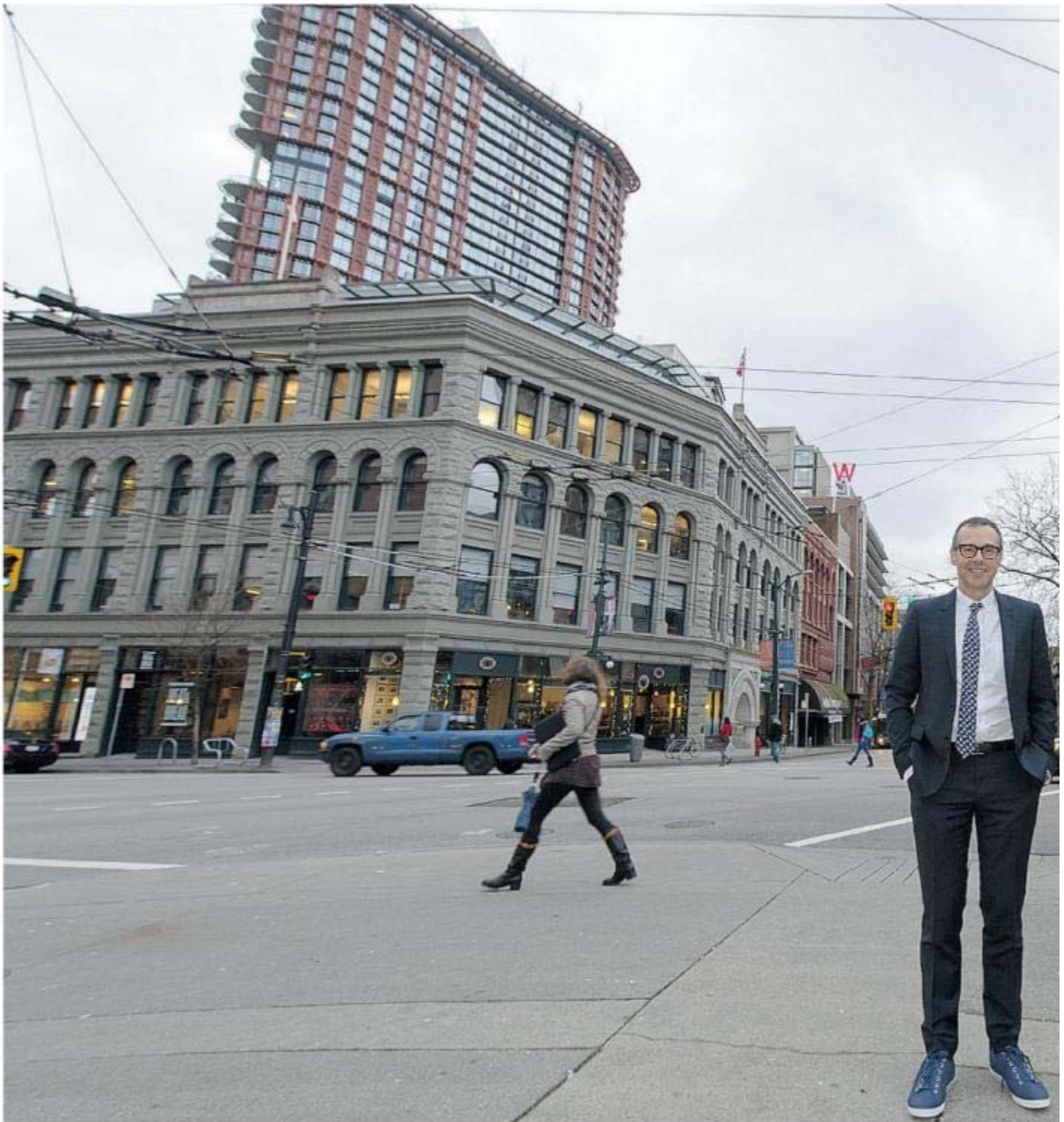


From down and out to international and edgy

Transformation of historic street balances demand for growth with neighbourhood charm

BY DARAH HANSEN, VANCOUVER SUN FEBRUARY 27, 2013



Vancouver developer Bob Rennie was involved in the Woodward's condo conversion and now has a new East Hastings project.

Photograph by: Ward Perrin, PNG, Vancouver Sun

John Atkin has a soft spot for East Hastings Street as it was in the 1970s.

"The Downtown Eastside, that was my kind of neighbourhood," the Vancouver historian said, recalling the magazine stores with their highbrow offerings and comfortable coffee shops that once dotted the road where east meets west.

East Hastings was vibrant then, still trading on an early legacy as Vancouver's central hub and the main highway in and out of town.

That was before the decline, before the length of the street, from Carrall Street east, began to sink beneath a punishing reputation as one of the poorest and most drug-infested in Canada.

Before the demise of Woodward's famed department store delivered the final kick in the teeth.

A CHANGING STREET

"The Woodward's stop on Hastings at Abbott was the busiest transit stop in the city, so when Woodward's went, they moved the bus stop," Atkin said.

But that's Vancouver for you. What's old and forgotten one day is new and hot the next.

The redevelopment of Woodward's into the trendy condo complex it is today is just the first of a long and growing list of large-scale housing and retail projects slated to transform the entire length of the street, from downtown Vancouver through to Burnaby.

So much is expected to happen on East Hastings in the coming years, the City of Vancouver is now calling it the Hastings "corridor" - a descriptor reserved for major arterials where development is reshaping the entire look and feel of the surrounding neighbourhoods.

And it will be a radical change, if you can believe some of the promotional hype: "It is St-Germain in Paris with a West Coast lifestyle. Authentically Vancouver, yet at the same time international and edgy," an email from Millennium Development's Adam Nour said of the bourgeois appeal of Hastings at McLean Drive, where the company's 82-unit condo complex, Boheme, is slated to be built.

Since 2007, 25 building projects have been completed along Hastings in Vancouver from Abbott to Boundary Road, adding 423,533 square feet of residential space and 206,956 square feet of commercial space to the city's existing stock.

Along with Millennium's Boheme, there are five major projects approved for development, including a condominium at the former Pan-tages Theatre site at 138 East Hastings, and a grocery store (rumoured to be Loblaws) at 1460 East Hastings.

CREATING A VILLAGE

Two more projects, including condos at 2778 East Hastings and 389 Penticton, are under construction, with six others under various stages of review by the city.

In Burnaby, nine condo projects along Hastings, as well as a 61-unit townhouse project, are either underway or on the books.

The vast majority of the Burnaby development interest is in the core Heights neighbourhood, where, since 1991, the city has encouraged four-storey mixed-use projects to be built in keeping with a

planned "urban village" feel. The plan seeks to combine existing community character, including small storefronts and walkable, pedestrian-friendly streets, with a boost in density. The city's original vision focused on the neighbourhood between Boundary and Willingdon, a century-old shopping district renowned for its European bakeries, pasta bars and delis.

The zoning boundary was extended farther east in 2008 to Gamma Avenue.

"The Heights itself is a bit of a destination," said Burnaby community planner Karin Hung. "It's a fairly close-knit community. People love shopping along the Heights area. Some people have been there a very long time. People are attracted to the area because of all the services and amenities that are there."

Matt Shillito, Vancouver's assistant director of planning, said the city envisions a gradual introduction of more residents, shops and services over the next five to 10 years along East Hastings, bringing "more of a life to the street and more people to the area."

Much of the development, planned or underway, is expected to happen within the boundaries of two community plans that, when completed next year, are intended to help guide future growth and change in the Downtown Eastside and Grandview-Woodland.

Together, the plans cover almost two-thirds of the length of Hastings within Vancouver, from Richards east to Nanaimo, and run through a mix of commercial, industrial and residential zones.

Hastings has also been flagged by TransLink and the city as an important transportation corridor. Considered a major bus route now, the street is slated for future transit improvements, including the possible introduction of light rail. Hastings also sees some of the heaviest traffic in the city, carrying an estimated 34,000 to 44,000 vehicles per day.

Shillito said the city is mindful of balancing new development with existing industrial uses that stretch primarily along the north side of the corridor and support more than 8,000 jobs, according to the 2006 census.

At the same time, Hastings was identified last year in the mayor's task force on affordable housing as one of the city's major arterials where increased density offering a range of new housing options could bring some financial relief to renters and buyers who might otherwise be priced out of the market.

Adding where possible to the city's stock of social housing is also part of that plan, particularly near the downtown core.

"Probably the biggest issue in the Downtown Eastside is providing adequate housing," Shillito said.

Hani Lamam, vice-president of development and acquisitions at Cressey Development Group, said developers' interest in Hastings has less to do with the street and its history, and more to do with the price and availability of land in an infamously expensive market.

"The easy opportunities on the west side have already been developed and whatever is left is a lot harder to do," Lamam said of the development drive east.

That's not to say East Hastings hasn't got a lot going for it.

"Hastings in Burnaby is a great place to live. There have (already) been numerous successful projects in Burnaby," said Lammam.

Not everyone pleased

Meanwhile, in Vancouver, what many have dismissed as industrial wasteland looks increasingly attractive to others, who see the North Shore vista and proximity to the downtown.

Regular bus service along the street offering a quick and direct link to the core and the affordability relative to other neighbourhoods are both big factors likely to draw buyer interest.

"Definitely we are going to attract more younger buyers because the product is more affordable, but there are a lot of people who live on the east side. That is their neighbourhood. That's what they know and what they understand and people tend to stay in their neighbourhood," Lammam said.

Adam Nour of Millennium said Boheme's location at 1588 East Hastings taps into Commercial Drive's thriving and culturally diverse atmosphere, and builds on the hipster vibe of the Waldorf Hotel across the street, nearby micro-breweries and trendy foodie specialty stores.

The Boheme project has yet to go to market, but Nour said he anticipates buyers from the west side, Yaletown and the surrounding east-side neighbourhood, including empty nesters and parents buying for their university-aged children. The website lists the smallest units at 492 square feet with prices starting at \$229,900.

Not everyone is pleased with the city's development plans.

The sale of the Waldorf to the condo development firm Solterra lit up public debate earlier this year with its mainly young patrons demanding protection for the popular east-side Tiki bar and art venue - and one of the last remaining hotels, which were plentiful along Hastings in the 1940s and '50s. The hotel's fans want a moratorium on condos on the property, which is bordered by industrial neighbours.

The city responded by ordering a 120-day assessment of the hotel to determine if the building deserves protection as a heritage landmark.

A final decision by council on heritage designation is expected in mid-May. If the designation is approved, it could limit development options on the property.

Not even a social-housing proposal at 41 East Hastings, now home to United We Can and the former Canada Ginseng Co., has escaped the critics who see it as unwanted gentrification in what is argued to be the last affordable neighbourhood in the city for the economically disadvantaged.

ACKNOWLEDGING HISTORY

The Atira Development Society, a development branch of the non-profit Atira Women's Resource Society, has applied to the city to rezone the Downtown Eastside property to allow for a 14-storey rental building. Sixty per cent of the planned 169 housing units are slated to rent for below-market rates, including 52 units reserved specifically for women.

Janice Abbott, Atira's chief executive officer, said she hopes the naysayers will see how necessary the project is to the community.

"We probably turn away 10 to 12 women every day because we don't have anywhere to house them," she said. The project's status remains under review by the city.

Bob Rennie has heard all the gentrification comments, too. His marketing company, Rennie Marketing Systems, was behind the record-breaking sales at Woodward's redevelopment when all 536 units sold in less than 12 hours in 2006.

Prices there started at around \$235,000 for the smallest units, about 590 square feet, and topped out at just over \$1 million for 1,100 square feet and a view.

Rennie is now marketing the 12-storey Wall Financial project to be built at 955 East Hastings. The partly vacant site was approved for rezoning from industrial in October, despite concerns from community advocates about its potential impact on affordability in the neighbourhood.

Rennie sees strong similarities between the two projects, notably the blend of market units with social housing. Woodward's redevelopment included 200 social housing units on the bottom 12 floors, while the Wall project, scheduled to break ground in mid2014, will see 70 social-housing units out of a total of 352.

Wall's development will also allow for more than 64,000 square feet of new commercial and light industrial space, including creative space for artists and craftspeople.

The aim is to attract buyers and renters who already know and love the neighbourhood, said Rennie.

It's not a complete bulldozing of the past, he said. Rather, it's the deliberate acknowledgment of the character and history of the street, and the needs of its residents, both existing and new, that sets these projects apart from those that could be labelled gentrification.

"I've always said, 'You shouldn't be buying on Hastings if you are looking for Yale-town,'" Rennie said.

John Atkin welcomes the reversal of fortune in and around his old stomping grounds.

True, some beloved businesses and iconic shops will be lost in the latest transition. But on a street that has already seen much change, this is simply a new chapter in Hastings' history, he said.

Besides, there is something comfortably familiar with what he's seeing take shape.

"What is really nice is this revival. Where everyone is looking at how much it has changed, it has actually just wound the clock back to when the area was vibrant and you had your population of people living in the hotels, and you had social services, but you also had a viable neighbourhood," Atkin said.

"To me, this feels like 1976."

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Local historian John Atkin, upper left, has a special fondness for Hastings Street and its businesses, such as the Ovaltine Cafe.

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