



300 BLOCK ABBOTT STREET

Building the Street of Dreams

This story is not just about technical plans and specifications. It's about how people combine, and work, and grow. The plans and specifications are important, and they're all here. But the real issue now, as it has been all along, is vision.

The Emerging Street

In 1903 Hastings Street wasn't paved. It was near the working heart of the city, and real estate here was cheaper than on the main street – Cordova. The neighbourhood's vibrancy was fuelled by the growth of the Province's forestry, fishing and mining industries. A new family, the Woodwards, took root and pushed up shoots of new economic life embodied in a modest four-floor wood building.

The people of the new city supported the Woodwards' vision, and this support transmuted into brick and mortar. Four floors of masonry and heavy timber – not too much. In fact, just right for the time, just enough for what the economy could support, buoyed by the aspirations of average people. And done with an eye to innovation – the building had balustrades on every floor that opened the space so people could see what was going on.

Within five years the Woodward family company staked out a tangible presence in the community, putting foundations under the ongoing success of the people who lived and worked around them, creating the structure now known as the northeast corner of the Woodward's building.

Over the years, nine more expansions reflected the continued success of both the family and the community. The northeast corner of the building, for example, started at four floors but grew to six, and then again to eight, as the community prospered and business grew. The 1923 expansion added the iconic W, a well-loved civic landmark.

In memory, at least, they were warmer days. Who doesn't have stories from the time – from their own experience, or that of friends, family and neighbours – about how the building came to represent the things we value? About the widow working on the sales floor one day and crying over the home that was going to be foreclosed, when her boss passed by and heard her story. The foreclosure never happened. Instead, the company put up the money and deducted it a bit at a time from her paycheque. Or about the peanut butter machine that became a focus for family trips on the weekend. Or about the Christmas display windows that lit the street and drew people to them.

But the building was more than a symbol. Perched on the edge of Chinatown, it was the meeting place of people from differing cultures, and brought the entire city into the neighbourhood.

The Failing Street

Unfortunately, times changed. In the late '80s, rising land prices caught the company in a bind. To ease it, the company sold the property and ownership of the iconic building left the community. It wasn't long before the retail market changed again and the company was forced into more drastic measures, closing stores.

The street, vibrant for many years before an addition of 1.3 million square feet of retail at Pacific Centre shifted the balance of the city, became quiet. Soon, the beleaguered Woodward's food floor and cafeteria closed down, which made the area less of a destination. In 1993 the lights went out on Hastings.

The Dormant Street

Then there's recent history. How many times have people tried to revive the building as housing? At least once it came within a breath of success. But the challenge has always been to balance affordable homes for people in the community with market homes. There just isn't enough money anymore to turn the site into only affordable housing (and deciding just who would get those homes has split the community for at least a decade). Yet, for people in the neighbourhood, the building has become a symbol of what could be – and one they refuse to let slip over into condos bought only by people from outside the neighbourhood.



LOOKING NORTHWEST AT ABBOTT AND HASTINGS



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HASTINGS STREET TODAY

The Street Renewed

A successful reincarnation of the Woodward's building requires pondering the big questions.

How do we use the mortar and bricks – especially the old ones that carry a weight of meaning – to help rebuild the community we've come to know as the Downtown Eastside? How do we create usable community spaces – including green spaces – in an urban cityscape? How do we ensure this construction project creates training programs and jobs for people from the neighbourhood? How do we reclaim the legacy of innovation and economic vibrancy that the building once represented?

We've considered these questions and are feeling our way toward solutions. In 1998, we restored the old Province building across the street from Woodward's, moved our company into it and, since then, have been involved in groups such as the Friends of Victory Square. We moved here because we believe in this community and the idea that it holds the answers to its own growth.

Growth that can be triggered by the Woodward's redevelopment. We believe it's possible to use the project to recharge the Downtown Eastside economy by requiring contractors meet LEED standards in sourcing their materials, and by asserting that close to 20 percent of the people they employ be from the community. Similarly, once the project is built, we believe the community can create additional jobs if we tie local employment incentives into leases and use some of the space for stimulating local retail development through an incubator plan. What else can be done? To find out, we will look to an advisory committee of locally chosen representatives to tell us what they have learned from the past, and what they want from the future.

Our vision doesn't need to stop at Abbott Street. Why not use this opportunity to knit together other parts of the community and generate ongoing development? Why not use the rebirth of this building, in our first neighbourhood, to signal the innovation and sustainability leadership that Vancouver can offer the world?



PROPOSED STREET ELEVATION

The Vertical Street

Our idea is to stretch the building's physical bounds by creating a vertical street. For half a century, people have viewed Woodward's as a slab that rests across the entire block. But what if we looked to the sky as the limit? The journey upward begins with economic stimulus, whether generated by learning or tourism, and includes a quality of life we take for granted in other parts of the city. What if we dreamed of parks in the sky?

The largest single group of people in the Downtown Eastside come from the First Nations. What if we used the opportunity of new life at Woodward's to listen to what residents have said, and create a native healing centre? This would both galvanize the community and reach out to people beyond it. The community visioning sessions are filled with talk about this need, as well as for spaces for performing and other arts. The conventional retail spaces, the learning centre for a university and the art space – they're all important. The opportunity here is to create something that links the heart of the Downtown Eastside with the rest of the province. We believe we can do it with activities that draw people into the space. And we can do it with homes.

About a decade ago we almost inked a plan for 200 affordable homes. By the time the current project started in 2003, that number had shrunk to 100. Today, with construction costs rising daily, the money set aside by the provincial government might only build, at most, 80 homes. Dealing with that challenge means thinking in new ways. It means linking the old with the new, and tapping into the kind of innovation that resulted in balustrades and wide-open spaces. If the money earmarked for this project can no longer support 100 affordable homes, where will the money come from? We believe we can provide more than 100 such homes and we can do it by creating a truly iconic building with enough homes sold at market rates to support the project.

The only way to do that is to go high, to 535 feet. In 1923, as a promotional event, a powerful beacon was built on the new elevator tower adorned with a W. The light was reportedly visible from Vancouver Island, and the people marvelled at it. We can recapture that excitement. By creating a vertical street of homes and parks in the sky we can fulfill an ambitious city program including economic development, education, and neighbourhood revitalization.



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ARMY AND NAVY

The Sustainable Street

In the same way the Woodward's Christmas windows once provided children with promises of things to come, so too will the new vertical street point to an exciting future. It will introduce what is possible in a sustainable building: innovative technologies, expansive green roofs, and regional materials will add up to healthy and affordable homes.

The work must begin now. Meaningful economic development – helping people get the training they need for new jobs – can't happen when the call goes out for bids from construction companies. We need to start at the beginning, setting aside training dollars that will make sure people in the community have the skills they need to take part in construction, to supply services to the construction site and materials for the building, and to create the businesses and jobs that will live on in the new Woodward's.

Most of all, we believe this process is just that – a process. For the last several months we've brainstormed ways we can create beautiful homes that pump blood into the heart of economic growth in the neighbourhood. The City asked us to focus our efforts on the Woodward's site. And we've done that. But it's been hard not to ask ourselves, "What if we thought outside the Woodward's box and drew in others in the community who could expand the project?"

Answering that question took us in an entirely new direction and, perhaps, one the City will want to consider later. It took us to the neighbourhood's still thriving retailer – Army & Navy. By moving Army & Navy into the Woodward's building we can insert an already healthy business into a retail centre that would also include a food store and open up more space in the building for neighbourhood uses, such as a satellite community centre. In turn, we could put Simon Fraser University into a redeveloped building at the Army & Navy site.

This isn't just about using more space – anyone could simply buy another lot to stretch out the project. It's about selecting the building spaces that are most appropriate to each purpose. It's about using already established knowledge and experience to help pull the project into a sustainable future. That's because most of all, it's about building from the heart of the community.

We believe that the people of the Downtown Eastside can make a difference. That creating a broad range of homes for people with different abilities and disabilities will help bring them together and revive the community. That the work of creating those homes can itself be a model for the self-sustaining community to come.

Commitment to Non-market and Affordable Housing in Vancouver

We believe in integrating non-market and affordable homes with market homes and other uses. For example, at our Robson and Richards site we are, for the first time in Vancouver, creating in one building a diversity of housing types for different socio-economic groups. As well, our Foundation for Youth continues to be active in the Downtown Eastside in various capacities, such as funding programs that help youth at risk.

The Landmark & Catalyst for Rebirth

We see healthy synergies among a diversity of uses that includes tourism, retail, a food store, education, a native healing centre, market style retail, homes, entertainment, a hotel – all within a world-class development. Something we in Vancouver and Canada can be proud of.



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