

A story often told portrays Vancouver's Downtown Eastside as an inner-city zone plagued by drug addiction, HIV infection and crime. The story less often heard, told by those who live and work in the area, is one of compassion, community, activism and hope for the future.

## Building Community

Vancouver's oldest neighbourhood, the Downtown Eastside, is an area rich in culture and history. A century ago it was the heart of the city, home to City Hall, Carnegie Library, the courthouse and many shops. As the city's centre shifted west, the area slid into decline – long-established stores closed or relocated, leaving empty buildings covered in graffiti.

### AN ENGAGED AND INCLUSIVE COMMUNITY

The City of Vancouver has worked hard with residents, businesses and non-profit groups to improve economic opportunities and quality of life in the Downtown Eastside. Residents organized the Heart of the City Festival, which highlights the community's diversity, heritage and culture, and is now one of Vancouver's major annual events.



### Supportive Housing

Supportive housing provides secure temporary homes and offers targeted aid to residents who want to develop the skills they need to improve their lives. Dunsmuir House offers 166 units of supportive housing, and help for mental health and addiction issues. The project dovetails with ongoing efforts by the City and the Province to develop 1,500 units of social and supportive housing at 14 City-owned sites.

### Affordable Housing

Shelter is a basic human need and an ongoing challenge for low-income residents. The City requires that all major residential developments include 20 per cent social housing, a policy that creates healthy mixed neighbourhoods, rather than segregating people by income level. Currently, there are well over 21,000 occupied units of social housing for disabled people, seniors, families, low-income singles and aboriginal people. Over one-third of these units are on City-owned land, operated by non-profit housing societies and cooperatives.

### Four Pillars Drug Strategy

Like any major city, Vancouver has to deal with the drug trade and its social, health and criminal ramifications. In 2001, City Council adopted the successful Four Pillars Drug Strategy, which balances prevention, treatment, harm reduction, and law enforcement, and views addiction mainly as a public health issue.



### Community-Based Policing Builds Trust

The Vancouver Police have taken a lot of steps to make things better in the Downtown Eastside, including foot patrols to meet residents and working with the Salvation Army to give out donated blankets during cold weather. Partners in Action assigns police officers as liaisons to single-room-occupancy social housing buildings and the non-profits that run them, to help make them safe, secure and supportive.



### Public Art Restores Civic Pride

Public art has a power beyond simply brightening a neighbourhood – it evokes a rich cultural past and fosters community pride. The City of Vancouver has helped fund a set of murals celebrating the Downtown Eastside neighbourhoods.

The largest of these, on the Russian Hall, is 12 m high and covers nearly 600 m<sup>2</sup> with illustrations of traditional Russian dance, music and decorations. It also pays homage to the Strathcona Property Owners and Tenants Association, which defended the area from freeway expansion plans in the 1970s.

### Civic Facilities: The Heart of the Community

Thirty years ago, the City converted the Carnegie Library and Museum into a community centre for residents of the Downtown Eastside, giving them an engaging and empowering space to develop themselves and their neighbourhood—in effect, their community living room.

The Carnegie Centre is an activity and learning hub, with a Vancouver Public Library reading room and a kitchen that provides nutritious meals to residents. Like many of Centre’s programs, the kitchen is staffed by volunteers from the neighbourhood who make social connections and develop skills.

### Woodward’s: Setting the Standard For A New Style of Redevelopment

The City has actively engaged the whole Downtown Eastside community in plans to revitalize the neighbourhood. Some describe the City’s major redevelopment of the old Woodward’s department store as an “upside down project” because it was founded on the community’s needs, rather than focused on commercial interests alone.

Throughout Woodward’s planning and development, skeptics questioned whether social housing and market condos could co-exist in such close proximity: would people who could afford market-priced residences consider living in the Downtown Eastside? Those questions were answered when the condos sold out just a few hours after being put on the market – proving that the Downtown Eastside is ready for the next phase in its evolution.

(Photos: The Blackbird)

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Front Page:  
Top right: Dunsmuir Social Housing Project, Bottom: Downtown Eastside Women’s centre.  
Back Page:  
Top Left: Public Art at the Russian Hall, East Vancouver. Bottom: Carrall Maple Tree Square, Downtown Eastside, Vancouver.