

In transforming Woodward's from derelict department store to vibrant community focus, the City of Vancouver and the people of the Downtown Eastside have created something unique, complex and rich – out of what many people thought was a lost cause.

Woodward's

RESURRECTION

The Woodward's project epitomizes a great many of the City's achievements, and challenges in one complex, multi-faceted story. The Downtown Eastside, a historically and culturally rich neighbourhood beset by poverty and drug abuse, has not only regained a healthy focal point, but also discovered and renewed its sense of community and its capacity to take collective action. After a long period of neglect, frustration, controversy and confrontation, the City's renewal and re-imagining of the Woodward's site has brought a new sense of progress, unity and hope to the neighbourhood.

HISTORY: THE WOODWARD'S DEPARTMENT STORE

The Woodward's store was built in 1903, in what was then the heart of Vancouver's shopping district. It became famous for its Christmas displays, food floor, and giant 'W' illuminated sign, installed in 1944. As the anchor of a vibrant commercial zone, Woodward's served as a hub and meeting place, supporting economic and social vitality throughout the neighbourhood.

STAGNATION

Woodward's closed as a department store in 1993, leaving behind 90 years' worth of concrete additions and extensions around a crumbling timber-frame core. A developer bought the building in 1995 for condominiums and businesses – but included no social housing. This sparked massive opposition in the low-income community. The Province of British Columbia in 1996 offered to fund a social housing component, but was unable to conclude a deal with the developer. Successive plans with different developers proved unworkable. In 2001, the Province purchased the building, planning social housing, commercial space and a home for Simon Fraser University's School for the Contemporary Arts. This project proved insurmountable and was also subsequently shelved.



The new mixed income residential towers stand out over the Downtown Eastside's heritage buildings and rail yard.

In the summer of 2002, yet another developer optioned Woodward's from the Province, planning a mix of rental housing and commercial and retail space, but community frustration had come to a head. In September, the building was occupied by homeless people and community groups demanding social housing. By November, the developer's option had expired. The City stepped in to end the Woodward's squat in December, working with the Portland Hotel Society to find temporary housing for most of the squatters.

INSPIRATION: WOODWARD'S AS NEIGHBOURHOOD CORE

The City purchased Woodward's in 2003, and immediately set about consulting with Downtown Eastside residents and community organizations. They arrived at a set of 19 guiding principles for the project, requiring that Woodward's be financially and environmentally sustainable, accessible to the disabled, a source of employment opportunities for area residents, and above all a catalyst for urban revitalization. In September 2004, the City partnered with Westbank Projects/Peterson Investment Group (Henriquez Partners, architects) to develop the project.

REVELATION: AN EXCEPTIONAL ACHIEVEMENT

The final design is the most complicated mixed-use development in the history of Vancouver. Incorporating social housing, and market condominiums together in the same buildings, along with an educational institution (Simon Fraser University), retail businesses, office space, non-profits and government offices, defied conventional wisdom among developers. But it honoured the desires of the community for a place where people from different walks of life could live and work side-by-side and thrive. In the end, the optimists were proven right: 536 condominiums in the residential towers sold out within a matter of hours.

Residents started moving into the condos of the W Tower in the autumn of 2009. Families moved into the social housing units of the Abbott Tower in November. The social housing units for singles in the West Hastings Street Building were ready about a month later. Businesses such as TD Canada Trust, London Drugs, and Nesters Food Market are open and employing some neighbourhood residents. There will be a day care on site. And office space will house the National Film Board, BC's Attorney General, Health Canada, several non-profit organizations, and a number of City of Vancouver departments.

HOPE: WOODWARD'S IN THE FUTURE

The Woodward's project has gained global attention as a symbol of diversity and inclusion in urban renewal, giving rise to at least two scholarly books, a doctoral thesis, and dozens of articles by international journalists. It will take time before the new Woodward's settles into its multiple roles, but the community is already showing green shoots. Local youths hired as welders and plasterers on the project are now foremen themselves, with big ideas about their neighbourhood's future. And asked where they want to live, they say: Woodward's.

