

A multi-story building with a rusted metal facade and balconies. The building features a grid of windows and balconies with black metal railings. A utility pole with wires is visible in the foreground. The overall aesthetic is industrial and modern.

**CASE STUDY 2:  
VICTORIA'S ROCK BAY  
REMNANTS OF INDUSTRY**

# CASE STUDY 2: VICTORIA'S ROCK BAY HERITAGE: REMNANTS OF INDUSTRY

## SITUATION BRIEF # 13

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*The history of the Northern Edge of Victoria's downtown is common to port cities all over the world. From Amsterdam to Shanghai we see the same story repeating itself - Brownfield remediation, the relocation of skid row, heritage vs highest-best use, marine industry vs residential land-use struggles. Let's explore some of these tensions and examine how processes of urban transformation and agents of change in Victoria have mediated the challenges.*

### **Establishing the Industrial & Residential historical context**

In the 1800s the area around Rock Bay was a bustling, dangerous and diverse industrial working harbour. Not that residential use was missing! Squeezed in and around the manufacturing and warehouse buildings were temporary camps, Songhees seasonal shelters, and later, tenement buildings. There was the Western Hotel at the corner of Discovery & Store while towards Government was a collection of working-class houses, cottages and shanties. During the gold rush, the tents of prospectors joined the cacophony. But near Rock Bay residential uses were secondary. Albion Ironworks and the Victoria Machinery Depot (VMD) and the Victoria Gas Works dominated the landscape, along with sawmills, warehouses, lumberyards and mills. Rock Bay was a hotbed of union politics, and in 1898 BC labour history was made when Lodge 191 was chartered by the

International Brotherhood of Boilermakers. This strong union connection remains to this day and Rock Bay remains one of the primary concentrations of union jobs in Victoria along with the government and universities.



The area was also a gathering point for the pioneer Japanese and Sikh communities. Japanese sailors, seasonal workers, traders and business-men clustered in the Store Street and Herald area where they established barbers, clothing and repair shops and occupied rooming houses. In the immediate vicinity was Zenkichi Nishimoto's ship-works, Kiyoshi Shimizu's rice mill and store and Manzo Nagano Grocery. By 1908, to serve a newly arrived resident Sikh population of over 250 and growing, the Sikh's established their first Gurdwaras in rented rooms at 620 Herald Street.

### **Industrial historical pressures**

Like other working harbours around the world, the Northern edge of downtown Victoria in the late 1900s was characterized by port retreat. Transportation

shifted from ships to air. Industrial uses that weren't marine dependant relocated to less expensive land in the suburbs leaving behind contaminated soil and shoreline. Next to Capitol Iron a contaminated infill site was cleared of PCBs and capped. In Rock Bay, BC Hydro discovered PCBs on their site in 1988. These PCBs had leaked from a concrete bunker and upon reaching the water table, bound with sediment, complicating cleanup and costing government over 90 million dollars. At the same time, coal tar contamination dating back to 19th century coal gasification needed to be remediated, a decade long project that cost nearly a 150 million dollars. (Clean up of Victoria's Rock Bay toxic site nearly complete, CBC News Jul 05, 2016)



## **Dereliction**

As this landscape shift proceeded, the remaining industrial land uses gave way to be replaced by services and habitat for the street community. These services co-existed with the remaining port industries with relatively little friction. But with increasing pressure from higher-scale residential development, they too were slowly pushed out. The loss of Victoria's "Skid Row" contributed to increased visibility and congregation of Victoria's homeless population and increased tension between street people and police.

## **Brownfield redevelopment – opportunities & challenges**

Typically, brownfield redevelopment is so expensive that government has to come to the table to help with remediation. Building on an unremediated brownfield site costs between 14% - 34% more in Canada than it does to build on greenfield. But even outside the obvious environmental gains, there are strong arguments for undertaking the work. In theory, indirect public benefits can include:

- Less sprawl,
- less pollution,
- reduced costs for infrastructure extensions,
- better waterfront access for communities,
- opportunities for affordable housing,
- increased market housing downtown,
- revitalisation of adjacent neighborhoods



Of course, these benefits depend on the choices made by agents of change such as city councils and developers. In the Victoria context, less sprawl and pollution has to be balanced against the savings that are created by barging

in aggregate used in construction right into the area where it will be used. If Ralmax or Ocean Island were to leave Rock Bay, that same aggregate would need to be trucked in (about 60 tons a day in 2002). Reduced costs for infrastructure extensions is only relevant if the alternative is building more suburbs. In the Greater Victoria's fragmented municipal context, that would be a hard argument to make. For Victoria municipality, pressure might be reduced on neighbourhood infill instead, which typically doesn't require the same levels of infrastructure extension.

Better public waterfront access and opportunities for affordable housing are, of course, negated by the tendency to build luxury condominium towers up to the water, creating a wall of private space and decreasing public access and view lines. Market housing would increase, but market housing for who? Is it for local, working-class people, or is it an enclave of second homes for a global or national market? In Victoria, services for the street community were pushed North to Burnside Gorge. Meanwhile, the Crosstown Plan set a pattern of redevelopment that relied on a view-scape that will only exist if the City honours the existing Old Town Design Guidelines, a commitment that is very much in question given recent decisions.

### **Working harbour vs Residential use**

The idea of a residential hub around Rock Bay isn't new, in 1981 Sam Bawlf put forward a plan for 1,200 housing units around the bay, anchored by an art gallery. Even before remediation, pioneer developers were looking for ways to bring new residential buildings to the area while respecting the industrial history, urban fabric and current land uses around them. Some of these projects were award-winning examples of best practices in urban renewal.



The Moore Paterson renovation of the derelict Quan Yuen Yen building created Dragon Alley which continued the fine-grained alley pattern of Chinatown while pulling in elements of the industrial landscape such as corrugated and wrought iron. Tom Moore, who served on the Cool Aid Board at the time, carefully considered the impact of his development on the street community, and the walled enclosure not only invokes a Chinese garden feel, but also served to reduce tensions between the ongoing industrial and skid row land uses in the area.

Mermaid's Wharf, built right next to Streetlink Emergency Shelter similarly prioritized neighbourhood fit. The dual façade reflects two eras of industrial dominance, facing the harbour, red brick construction evokes the 19th century industrial harbour while the northern side picks up contemporary industrial style with corrugated metal siding, oversized bolts and beams and cast-iron features. Artfully designed patios and rooftop amenities treat the industrial harbour as theatre. On the street and parkade level, high end security again reduced tensions with residents of Streetlink shelter.

Chris LeFevre, whose developments almost define place-sensitive architecture in Victoria's Old Town context was another pioneer. His insider understanding of the downtown Victoria arts scene led to a masterpiece residential heritage loft renovation on Herald Street. This purpose-built rental building offered a home to the many artists and artisans who lived and worked, sometimes illegally, in the derelict commercial buildings nearby. Low rents, minimalist, utilitarian spaces, relaxed noise rules, and exquisite attention to the historical industrial aesthetic immediately attracted this arts community. Refrigeration pipes from inside the building became artistic flourishes on the outside, old lettering on the side of the building was retained, the original safe was repurposed as decoration and the hallways were lined with archival photos of the area's past. This thoughtful approach served to stem the out-migration of the downtown arts scene who had been pushed gradually north by residential development, The irony being that the success of the areas they had inhabited, from Government Street, to Broad Street, to Chinatown's Fan Tan Alley was accelerated by their cultural cache in a process known to urbanists as "artist led gentrification".



Urban amphitheatre form proposed by the Downtown Plan



## **Artists led gentrification**

Authenticity in urban landscapes is something hard to define but we all know it when we see it. Lower Johnson Street and Fan Tan Alley feel organic, exciting, and adventurous. The Soho district in New York went from a derelict manufacturing area to one of the trendiest neighbourhoods in the world. Portland's Pearl district, London's Canary Wharf, over and over we see the pattern done well, and digging into the commonalities, the role of the artist emerges as foundational to the emergence of authentic, successful revitalization. The process is simple and well understood. Affordable rents and relaxed bylaw enforcement attract artists to a derelict neighbourhood. They engage with the history and aesthetic of the place, creating moments in time and space that become part of the cultural history of the city. This attracts students and urbanites, followed by cafés, restaurants, and boutique retail ventures, and before you know it, rents have risen, the original artists are pushed out and the momentum of gentrification rolls onward.

It was the arts community's appreciation for, and playful interaction with the industrial heritage of Rock Bay that reimagined the area. The aesthetic that emerged celebrated and fetishized the commonplace objects of industrialization and industrial harbours: rusty gears, crumbling brick, etc. Architects like Moore and LeFevre were artists in their own right, with the landscape as pallet. But they were also patrons and promoters of the local arts scene, and the facades, decorative elements and final touches to their properties were overwhelmingly locally sourced. Thus, in the early 2000s three separate artistic welding shops operated in these few blocks, supported by business and property owners who saw the beauty of the industrial landscape. The aesthetic that emerged celebrated and fetishized the commonplace objects of industrialization and industrial harbours: rusty gears, crumbling brick, corrugated iron and exposed

beams and earned it the moniker “Victoria’s Design District”.

This re-packaging and theming of the Northern edge of Downtown Victoria by artists and architects, sanitized the derelict post-industrial urban landscape, paving the way for residential gentrification. Now, with contamination cleaned up by government, land transfer of Rock Bay lands to the Songhees and Esquimalt nations, plans for the Capital Iron lands, and ongoing tensions between the industrial and residential land uses, the future of this area is in question.

### **Ongoing critical decisions**

There are going to be some critical decisions made soon which will determine if this area will maintain its authenticity, or if it will become a shadow of Vancouver’s least attractive areas. Will the architects and developers involved pick up the pallets and design elements of the neighbourhood? Or will they import designs from elsewhere, obscuring what used to be there. Will new developments consider affordability? Or will they cater only to wealthy buyers, pricing out local artists and authentic artists spaces? The city wants to create an



Rock Bay urban form proposed by Downtown Plan



Rock Bay urban form as proposed by Reliance

“Arts and Innovation” area, but art is notoriously stubborn, and refuses to thrive in soulless environments. Will the overall urban form retain the amphitheatre effect of rising heights from harbour-front northward. The Design District emerged, and is still emerging from a rich history and sense of place. The “Arts and Innovation” area may well be the death of both the history and the sense of place, or it could revitalize and project it into the future.

## Observations

- Significant investments of capital and effort have been applied to recent development in this historic industrial zone adjacent to Old Town/Chinatown in particular to reference its traditional uses also its economic and social history. This urgently needs to be matched by public investment in interpretive signage and other forms of historical/environmental explication in order to bring forward the colourful narrative “industrial Victoria” and its role as a first “safe harbour” for the City’s early East Asian communities.
- The recent Reliance Properties proposal for the redevelopment of two

blocks bounded by the waterfront, Chatham and Pembroke picks up on some brown-site themes: retention of heritage buildings (Capital Iron) connection to waterfront, “fine arts” facilities (Art Gallery), live/work artist housing, greening, limited retention of light marine industrial. No doubt further refinement of density distribution over the site, height and location of connectors through the site as well convenience of parking to Store Street retail and industrial, lower income accommodation and facilities. However, as ever, the devil will be in the details. As yet there has been no mention of design as design vocabulary as per the established industrial aesthetic already in place for the region: materials palette, iconic building forms, street frontage massing rhythms etc. Without this the development would compromise the mnemonic references and disrupt the carefully crafted continuity of character.

- The idea of creating an “Arts and Innovation” district builds on earlier notions



which sought to rebrand the North end of the City as the “Design District”. The two themes could come together as a “Creative Commons”. This would ensure the idea of “art” is broadened to a multi-disciplinary inclusion of various popular arts including craft studios, boutique theatrical and music performance spaces, teaching/workshop spaces, design and small manufacturing ateliers, architectural offices, small-business incubators and the like.

- A current proposal to relocate the Art Gallery of Greater Victoria to Store

Street would insert a major arts generator into Down Town and anchor the proposed “Arts and Innovation” district. Also, adjacent to Chinatown and in an area of historic significance to the Japanese and Sikh communities, it would be a fitting location to permanently feature the AGGV’s renowned Asian Art collections.

- Large-scale redevelopment on the northern edge of Old Town opens up the opportunity to follow up on an earlier proposal by the late Dr. David Lai to memorialize the Asian heritage of this area by incorporating an inner-block traditional Oriental garden.

## References

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