
VANCOUVER SHRUGGED

HOSTING AN OLYMPICS,
MULLING A CRISIS

CODY VALDES

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In the heart of Vancouver, one of Canada's most affluent cities and host of the 2010 Winter Olympic Games, there lies a bustling neighborhood so devastated by poverty, mental illness, and drug addiction that it makes even the most jaded of its homeless residents cringe. This is a narrative of urban decline, emerging forcefully as the city luxuriated in celebration after seven long years of waiting. What the Olympics means for this community as it verges on the brink of collapse, and what a city whose residents fruitlessly attempt to quell an exploding homeless population will do for its most vulnerable, are questions that Vancouverites have neglected to answer for far too long.

Spanning an area of roughly 45 square blocks to the east of the downtown core, the Downtown Eastside is a peculiar fragment of Vancouver. Vibrant but downtrodden, eclectic yet feared, it is at once both a breeding ground for criminal activity and a hub of support for those seeking redemption in their lives. Inner-suburban residents living a mere fifteen minutes from the downtown core may traverse to and from its shopping centers and its waterfront without ever smelling the urine-stained alleys near Pigeon Park or the sidewalk vegetable markets of Chinatown. This is the area deemed by the international media, when it receives attention at all, as an "open drug bazaar."¹ As Chris Koentges noted in a recent editorial, "When Vancouver concierges draw directions on tourist maps, they scribble a little red box around a certain part of the Downtown East Side and say, 'Don't go here.'"² As property developers for the affluent consume what is left of the downtown core and skyrocketing rates of homelessness go unchecked, Vancouver's Olympic-size tale of prosperity has unveiled an equally desperate tale of penury hiding in its vast shadow.

Walking the streets of this ransacked neighborhood provides nothing short of a sensual assault. Police cars are as ubiquitous as drug addicts, who poke in and out of the alleyways, shooting up heroin behind dumpsters or on busy sidewalks in broad daylight. Smells of dried fish and rotten vegetables in Chinatown complement the urine-stained nooks of apartment buildings near Main and Hastings. This is the epicenter of the community and the place most visited byrepid reporters hoping to capture a glimpse of rock-bottom with a human face. This street corner, known locally as 'Pain and Wastings,' is where familiar faces crowd the steps of Vancouver's former public library, many engrossed in a self-conversation that contributes to the loitering din on a chilly winter afternoon. Estranged acquaintances embrace one another warmly, cognizant of life's enduring fragility on these frigid streets. For the truly desperate, the cold is of secondary concern; imprisoned in an ongoing quest to fund their addiction, they panhandle, solicit and steal, moving from one ten-dollar hit to the next.

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On the Periphery

As the city hosted the 2010 Winter Olympic Games, the fate of the Downtown Eastside's impoverished community remained uncertain. Facing the inevitable threat of gentrification and the less discussed prospect of "street sweeps,"³ this faltering community, along with the many hundreds of homeless who drift outside its borders, will be profoundly affected by the Olympic Games. Whether the nature of its impact will be positive or negative remains to be seen, as the city's commitment to creating "a strong foundation for sustainable socio-economic development in Vancouver's inner-city neighborhoods, particularly in Downtown Eastside,"⁴ must be fully realized if the low-income community is to emerge from the Games intact, let alone stronger than before.

The Downtown Eastside has not always represented the destitution and poverty of a neglected inner-city community. During Vancouver's nascent years in 1870, the area served as the central gateway for European settlers, bearing the city's cultural, commercial, and political hubs in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries.⁵ The young community transformed land that was once the propertied domain of local First Nations villages, as the rapid progression "from the local worlds of fishing, hunting, and gathering peoples... to a modern corner of the world economy" indelibly changed the local Aboriginal culture.⁶ Despite the significant pre- and post-colonial presence of First Nations peoples in the Downtown Eastside, sociologist Nicholas Blomley notes that for Aboriginals, "cultural memories of dispossession would crystallize into a province-wide political and legal movement for land claims" during the twentieth century. In all likelihood, this fight will continue to retain its symbolic significance in the twenty-first century while failing to produce the landmark redistribution of lands that First Nations seek today.⁷ Aboriginal peoples remain prominent in the Downtown Eastside, currently comprising roughly one-tenth of the region's population even though they represent only two percent of Vancouver as a whole.⁸

By the mid-twentieth century, Vancouver's burgeoning downtown had become vaguely separated along the lines of class, gender and race. The west side contained a middle-

and upper-class of European and Eastern Canadian families, while the east side housed a working-class population of white immigrant laborers, Chinese- and Japanese-Canadians and Aboriginals.⁹ A shift in real estate and commercial investments towards the west side meant that residents of the Downtown Eastside could continue to afford property in the area, but signaled the end of its role as the city center. In 1958, streetcars that had once carried thousands of Vancouverites into the historical chambers of its neighborhoods stopped running, drastically decreasing traffic to the neighborhood.¹⁰ The city library relocated from a more central location in the city to the west, as did numerous office headquarters and major businesses. Gentrification in other communities drove additional low-income residents into its affordable hotels and warehouses, and when a lack of public funding in the 1970s led to the "de-institutionalization of thousands of psychiatric patients," they, too, flocked to the Downtown Eastside in search of cheap accommodation.¹¹

As the Downtown Eastside became the primary destination for the city's minority and low-income citizens, public discourse frequently sought to marginalize the neighborhood, at times even seeking to disown it. "Long coded as a place of dubious morality, racial otherness, and masculine failure, after World War II the [Downtown Eastside] became labeled Vancouver's 'skid row,'" according to Blomley.¹² From the late 1970s onwards, the problem of homelessness and poverty in the Downtown Eastside became wedded to the equally pervasive realities of drug abuse, crime, disease, and mental instability, all of which combined to create the pernicious cycle of marginality for which life in the community is now known. Public health in the area is notoriously poor, punctuated by "excessive use of tobacco and alcohol, a high number of intravenous drug users, people with mental illness, high rates of HIV and AIDS... and periodic outbreaks of tuberculosis and syphilis," as shown by a 2007 study.¹³ Unfortunately, these trends have only grown stronger in recent years, with the number of homeless and drug-abusers converging on Main and Hastings increasing at an unrelenting pace.

From the 1980s to the late 1990s, the population of the Downtown Eastside grew from roughly 14,000 to 16,000, hovering at approximately three percent of the city's population.¹⁴ In contrast, the number of drug arrests

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 he had come to the downtown eastside to die
 ...

but he said
 since living in the downtown eastside
 what with the people he has met
 and the groups he has found
 he now wants very much to live

and his words go directly
 to the heart of what makes for real community
 a new life out of apparent death
 ...

An excerpt from “raise shit – a downtown eastside poem of resistance” by Bud Osborn in Paul Taylor, ed., The Heart of the Community: The Best of the Carnegie Newsletter (2003).

In all but one of its seven sub-areas, the vast majority of residents in the Downtown Eastside do not live with families, and fifty percent of these individuals live alone, a reality that has significant implications on the support systems available to the community and its pejorative perception as an aging “human wasteland.”

made in the area as a percentage of citywide figures had reached an astounding high of 81.3 percent in 1997.¹⁵ While the addition of more than 2,000 non-market housing units outpaced the number of lost Single-Resident Occupancy units (SRO) over this period, many of the new units failed to accommodate the most vulnerable one-person households, creating a housing shortage that further exacerbated the homeless problem.¹⁶ Currently, the population is largely male (sixty-two percent) and significantly older than the rest of the city, having twice the seniors and half the youth as a percentage of its population.¹⁷ Reflective of the multicultural demographic of Vancouver’s larger population, the rate of immigrant to non-immigrant peoples in the Downtown Eastside is roughly the same as that of the city, recently reaching 50/50.¹⁸ In all but one of its seven sub-areas, the vast majority of residents in the Downtown Eastside do not live with families, and fifty percent of these individuals live alone,¹⁹ a reality that has significant implications on the support systems available to the community and its pejorative perception as an aging “human wasteland.”

Over the past two decades, the demand for middle- and upper-class housing in Vancouver has grown significantly. Areas like Gastown, a historic yet newly-hip piece of the downtown waterfront, are turning their gentrifying eyes towards the zone that had been largely ignored by investors, once disregarded as insignificant due to the abundance of other sites where condominiums and office buildings were in high supply. Recently, loft developers have made small inroads into the periphery of the Downtown Eastside, while city-endorsed megaprojects to the south and west are taking root dangerously close to the under-developed neighborhood, producing what is effectively, as Blomley describes, a “property frontier that encircles the area.”²⁰

Both residential Strathcona and historic Gastown are undergoing the process of gentrification,²¹ the latter to a much greater degree, and long-time residents of the community have taken up arms. From local street poet Bud Osborn, whose “Raise shit: a downtown eastside poem of resistance” combines scholarly references to gentrification with poetic prose to create “a powerful mapping of the multiple displacements that threaten the Downtown Eastside,”²² to community activist groups such as the Anti-Poverty Committee (APC) and the Downtown Eastside Residents Association (DERA), whose demonstrations are frequent and ineluctable, parts of the Downtown Eastside community fully perceive the imminent threat of being left behind as the city continues its growth. Set in this context, the Olympics merely represent an acceleration of a process of social upheaval that has continued apace for nearly 30 years.

Conflicting Agendas

In July 2003, amid reserved anticipation, it was announced that Vancouver had won its bid to host the 2010 Winter Olympic Games. While part of the city's bid included a promise to revamp its war on poverty, the Olympics were touted by media and government officials as a sign of the city's achievement and an opportunity for even greater growth. If, however, the Olympic Games are to be seen as an international "coming out" party for the city of Vancouver – as an exercise in developing an increasingly global identity – then a myriad of germane issues relating to equitable housing, civilian life, community strength, and social-service provisions must be addressed. A fierce debate still exists within the city over the purported benefits and drawbacks of hosting the Olympics. Since it was first announced as an Olympic candidate, Vancouverites have long ruminated on the various caveats that accompany liberal growth and foreign-led development – policies seemingly inherent to the process of becoming a global city that, one might argue, are most symbolically embraced in the hosting of such a mega-event.

Professor Anne Haila argues that the politics of a global city diverge from that of a normal city when it demonstrates the "increased importance of real estate investments and the increased influence of real estate investors"²³ in its growth policy as it seeks to "create a favorable image for the city in order to attract foreign investors." The 2010 Olympic Games, undoubtedly an exercise in image building, have spurred an already booming real estate industry in Vancouver's downtown and are likely to provide further "fuel for the real estate market" after the Olympics, says Mark Lester, a senior vice president at the real estate consultant firm Colliers International.²⁴ Ranked the second most expensive city in Canada to live in and the sixty-fourth most expensive city in the world,²⁵ the average price of housing has gone up nearly seventy-five percent since the city won its bid for the Games in 2003.²⁶ The city has come a long way from 1979, when sports broadcaster for the North American Soccer League championship Jim McKay referred to Vancouver as a "village," no doubt a product of its increased international recognition. The World Exposition of 1986, the first event of its kind held in the city, attracted a wave of investment from across the Pacific.²⁷ The gentrification of many parts of the city, a direct result of this increase in foreign investment, is a particularly divisive symptom of its growth, dislocating vulnerable and low-income residents in historically less-desired areas of the real estate market.

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Ironically, as the wealthy downtown core slowly converges on the resolute communities on or near the unofficial borders of the Downtown Eastside, the impoverished community has pushed back with its own tools of passive resistance. Since the Federation of Canadian Municipalities declared homelessness a "national disaster" in 1998,²⁸ efforts to curb this disturbing trend have consistently failed. The number of homeless in Metro Vancouver has risen a staggering 137 percent from 2002, reaching an all-time high in March 2008 of roughly 2,660.²⁹ Of those, 59 percent, up from 30 percent in 2002, are unsheltered and living on "the street, in alleys, doorways, parkades, parks, on beaches, or [on] sofas," according to a city report.³⁰

For some Vancouverites, the presence of the homeless is no longer just a nuisance but an attack on general civility. Negative images that forebodingly portray the clash of Vancouver's two distinct worlds, promulgated haphazardly by local and international media, resonate with many.³¹ For them, the imperative to improve the homeless problem is strong – even if for the wrong reasons – but the prospect of dipping deep into the municipal and provincial budget to eradicate homelessness seems a difficult pill to swallow. It is for this reason that initiatives by the B.C. Liberal government, which has habitually neglected social programs in an effort to reduce the public deficit,³² and former Mayor Larry Campbell's 2001 "Four Pillars Drug Strategy," a plan for addressing street addiction that over-emphasized policing to the detriment of prevention and treatment,³³ have been unsuccessful in revitalizing the Downtown Eastside.

Meanwhile, other city residents subscribe to the more sympathetic views of City Councillor Peter Ladner, who in 2004 remarked of the homeless problem: "People don't like it, not because it's messy, but because it's a shameful thing."³⁴ A common sentiment shared by this group, as reflected in local media sources and popular mayoral election platforms, is that no city as wealthy and "livable" as Vancouver should lay claim to the proportionately largest homeless population in all of Canada. For them as well, the eradication of homelessness has become the city's top priority, reflected in the promises of former mayor Sam Sullivan, whose failed attempt to cut rates of homelessness in half during his term cost him the 2008 election. (The city's new mayor, Gregor Robertson, has shown even greater ambition by campaigning on a plan to completely eradicate homelessness by 2015.)³⁵ Regardless of claims made by the city's financially-limited municipal government, the success of any plan to reduce the growing homeless population and prevent thousands more evictions in the Downtown Eastside will remain contingent on the will of the provincial and federal governments.

Perplexingly, government officials at all levels *have* recognized the necessity for coordinated efforts in the fight against poverty, yet why, after nearly a decade of joint response, has the condition of these vulnerable communities continued to deteriorate? Each initiative offered glimpses of hope, highlighting the potential for gradual improvement in the Downtown Eastside. But as poverty levels and homelessness continue to rise in the city's poorest regions, it becomes clear that the city will face an uphill battle in the coming year if its commitment to improving the lives of the poor is to be successful.

One of the innumerable projects, initiatives, and collaborative efforts to reduce homelessness introduced during and since Vancouver's successful Olympic bid in 2003, "Opportunities Starting Now" has failed to produce a net decrease in homelessness or reverse the rate of displacement in the Downtown Eastside. Other examples of such initiatives include the Regional Homeless Plan (2000), the Provincial Homeless Initiative (2004), the Homeless Action Plan (2005), Housing Matters (2006), the Homeless Partnering Strategy (2007), and most recently, Olympic Legacy Affordable Housing (2008). In 2007, the Advisory Housing Table, a partnership between federal, provincial, and municipal governments as well as the Vancouver Olympic Committee (VANOC), ambitiously declared its "shared recognition that the legacy of the Games should be the elimination of homelessness."³⁶ With its stated commitment to "ensure people are not made homeless as a result of the Winter Games," to "ensure residents are not involuntarily displaced, evicted or face unreasonable increases in rent due to the Winter Games," and to "provide an affordable housing legacy and start planning now,"³⁷ the Housing Table seemingly placed a high priority on the wellbeing of Vancouver's most vulnerable population.

Despite the ongoing implementation of various anti-homelessness and sustainable-growth projects in and around the Downtown Eastside, the number of homeless was projected to triple during the period 2007 to 2010,³⁸ leaving no foreseeable end to the appalling conditions of Vancouver's low-income residents. According to a study conducted by the Pivot Legal Society, a non-profit legal advocacy organization located in the Downtown Eastside, recent rates of community displacement resulting from housing loss only accelerated in the months and years preceding the Olympic Games. A report submitted to the Advisory Housing Table in March 2007, describing what would have to occur for the province and the city to fulfill their promise to prevent homelessness and protect its vulnerable residents, projected the cost of such measures at over \$1 billion and suggested that *even with* available funds the goals would be difficult, if not impossible, to meet.³⁹ Recognizing the urgency of the Housing Table's commitments, Campbell's provincial government allocated \$328 million towards social housing in April of that year, announcing plans to create or preserve 996 units throughout the province.⁴⁰ Whether such commitments made at the eleventh-hour will suffice for the residents of the Downtown Eastside remains to be seen.

While Vancouver's affordable housing becomes increasingly scarce, the development of high-priced real estate has become "a source of tension and debate within the city,"⁴¹ as president of Cascadia Pacific Realty Beverly Kniffen observes. Nevertheless, comparisons to world cities such as New York or Los Angeles – where, according to global cities scholars John Friedmann and Goetz Wolff, metaphorical "citadels" and "ghettos" demarcate the urban landscape – are unwarranted. The homeless have become a fixture within the city, dotting even the busiest of sidewalks where the tourists, suburbanites, and urban professionals traverse between work and play. But the "bitter and tenacious struggles of poor people... for greater access to the conditions for social power" that Friedmann and Wolff argue are characteristic of world cities, do prevail, as the Anti-Poverty Committee or the Downtown Eastside Residents Association gain considerable attention from the municipal government through their public demonstrations. As scholar Saskia Sassen notes, however, the struggle between seemingly

competing actors in globalizing cities – between the spheres of global corporate power and the marginalized local poor – is "hardly the terrain of a balanced playing field."⁴² There is no better illustration of this reality in Vancouver than in the varying abilities of poor people's movements and powerful Olympic promoters to attract and control media coverage.

The expanse of poverty-aiding organizations stemming from the Downtown Eastside, united in resistance to the perceived "Olympic establishment," have held almost weekly demonstrations aimed at raising awareness, demanding equal rights, or resisting the gentrification of their neighborhoods. While Vancouver is not yet on par with Los Angeles or New York in terms of global city status – it failed to rank in the top sixty of *Foreign Policy's* 2008 Global City Index where recent Olympic host cities Beijing and Sydney both made the top twenty – the inertia of global formation in the young city is continually felt.⁴³

While protest groups from the Downtown Eastside might be out-spent and out-publicized by the comparatively well-endowed bodies of the regional governments and the International Olympic Committee (IOC), their ability to bring attention to their struggle for rights and recognition by the city is made possible through their strong network of human capital and a penchant for effective grass-roots activism. However, as Rule 51 of the IOC's 2007 Charter stipulates, "No kind of demonstration or political, religious or racial propaganda is permitted in any Olympic sites, venues or other areas."⁴⁴ In recent history, host cities have employed a strict interpretation of this rule to justify various anti-democratic measures of reducing the likelihood of protest, taking "other areas" to include the core of the city itself. When coupled with the universal desire of Olympic cities to project a positive image onto the international eye, this rule has routinely allowed governments to preemptively remove members of its population that might be inclined to protest, or even those that simply produce an eyesore on the streets, in preparation for the Games.

In Beijing, the most recent host of a mega-event, the unrelenting development that for years defined its urban landscape was rapidly accelerated during its preparations for the Games, concealing some of the harsh realities confronted by many of its citizens. As geographer Harm de Blij noted, the Summer Games of 2008 resulted in "a wholesale sweeping away of historic neighborhoods, their inhabitants exiled to remote apartment buildings beyond the outermost of its several new eight-lane ring roads."⁴⁵ Ironically, while the inhumane displacement of Chinese neighborhoods and communities received scant attention from the international media, a press conference held in Beijing by British Columbia Premier Gordon Campbell quickly devolved into an unremitting interrogation by the international press over the issue of poverty and homelessness.⁴⁶ Fighting speculation that vast numbers of homeless and low-income people will be forcefully ejected from the city during the 2010 Games, Campbell noted that "people have neighborhoods, too," and that he "will try to make the neighborhood healthier. It's a very inclusive approach."⁴⁷ Responding to questions from members of the Beijing media over the likelihood of potentially embarrassing protests by groups such as the Anti-Poverty Committee, Campbell shot back by saying, "In Canada we will be open to opportunities for people to express whatever views they have. There will not be opportunities to break the law, [but] we will make sure

there will be full and equal expression throughout the 2010 Olympics."⁴⁸

Such promises of inclusivity and a stated willingness to permit lawful protest would be unprecedented for a modern Olympic host city. In a report prepared for the International Symposium for Olympic Studies in 2006, Lenskyj plainly outlined the disastrous legacies that Olympic Games and other hallmark events impart on inner-city poor. She noted that "in the last two decades, the vast majority of bid and host cities have shared a common problem: a housing and homelessness crisis," observing that "Seoul, Barcelona, Atlanta, Amsterdam, Sydney, Beijing, Toronto, Athens, Turin, New York," and of course, "Vancouver," had all touted "an affordable housing legacy that is unlikely to materialize," while the reality was that "conditions for homeless and inadequately housed people [were] exacerbated by the hosting of the Olympics."⁴⁹

The evidence gathered by various government watchdog institutions, inquiring media sources, and anti-poverty coalitions in the aftermath of hallmark events like the Olympics is routinely shocking. Lenskyj noted that during Calgary's 1988 Winter Olympic Games, "Over 2,000 people were temporarily or permanently evicted to make way for Olympic visitors."⁵⁰ In Salt Lake City, host of the 2002 Winter Olympics, initiatives that had already been undertaken by its impoverished communities to improve their quality of life were ignored.⁵¹

During its bid for the 2000 Summer Olympic Games, a spokesperson for the Sydney government egregiously labeled any preliminary social impact assessment "a waste of taxpayers' money."⁵² Instead, a series of laws were enacted in the years preceding the Games that essentially criminalized homelessness in targeted tourist areas – most of which were temporary, others of which lasted for two years, and some of which "had no sunset clause on them."⁵³ In Athens, post-Olympic reports showed that "Roma communities in and around Athens had been evicted by municipal authorities in 2001 and 2002," citing incidences where water and electricity were deliberately cut off in long-established squatter communities and others where low-income houses were "bulldozed or burned to the ground."⁵⁴

The most disturbing of all reports came from the City of Atlanta, host of the 1996 Summer Olympic Games, whose human-rights record during the months and years leading up to its Games was especially appalling. Gentrification and land-speculation were responsible for an inordinate amount of displacement in the months leading up to the Games. The Centre on Housing Rights and Evictions (COHRE), a group based in Geneva, Switzerland that has documented the impacts of hallmark events on their host cities' poor, revealed that as "landlords refused to renew leases, cancelled agreements, and raised their rents in a frantic, speculative move to cash in on the Olympic housing potential... at least 30,000 residents of low-income housing in Atlanta were displaced for the Olympics."⁵⁵ Furthermore, a group of inquisitive reporters and journalists operating at the time, known as the "non-credentialed press," uncovered a series of actions taken by the local government intended to "cleanse" the city of its poor. A non-profit travel agency, fully funded by local governments, purchased thousands of dollars of one-way bus tickets for the poor and homeless "to get them out of town for the Games."⁵⁶ Even worse, reporters discovered that police in Atlanta were "found to be mass-producing arrest citations," pre-printed with the profile of "African American, Male, [and] Homeless," left only with a blank space for the type of crime.⁵⁷

Despite the repeated assurances of VANOC and government officials that such measures would be explicitly off-limits during the 2010 Games, the track record of mistreatment towards homeless and poor inner-city residents remains unbroken, even in "advanced nations" in the 21st century.

Local Aboriginal scholar Dara Culhane proclaims that "while much *public* space [in the Downtown Eastside] has been taken over by police, drug dealers and users, sex workers and pimps, pawn shops and street fences, the majority of residents of the neighborhood are none of the above."⁵⁸ While she goes on to claim that "denizens of wealthier neighborhoods engage in these practices as well," albeit in the privacy of closed doors, it becomes clear that in a city that has banked so much of its future on a somewhat misrepresentative reputation of 'livability,'⁵⁹ image is what most matters to Vancouver, and public displays of developing-world disease rates and poverty would not be tolerated come February 2010.

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What's in it for Me?

Aside from the extensive network of anti-poverty activists that grace each pre-Olympic festivity with an agenda for disruption, one senses a general disregard for the upcoming Games in the Downtown Eastside. "What is in it for me?" one man asked, as he stood watching over an electrician's toolbox in a local homeless shelter, seemingly confident that the answer was an unequivocal nothing. Unaware that the Olympic Games have displaced over 20 million people worldwide due to housing evictions, gentrification, and the criminalization of the lifestyle he lives, he was more concerned that tickets for the main events would be too expensive. Despite the last-minute efforts of the province and the city, low-income housing is being lost at an astounding pace. And as countless host cities have done in the past, police have enacted a heavy-handed campaign aimed at clearing the streets of the community's homeless and addict population. For him, however, the price of admission was the greatest injustice of all.

The life of a drug addict, a prostitute, or a street-level cocaine dealer appears far less incriminating in a world where all legal means of self-preservation have been exhausted, and crime and taboo become a way of life. Despite the visual onslaught of heroin users and decaying buildings, beneath the decrepitude that this neighborhood projects, there lies a deep sense of community that has been forced to stand by and watch as the encroachment of the city hastens, not without the help of an indifferent province and a complacent federal government. Gone are the open patios of sports cafes where low-income residents could gather with friends. Gone are the days when affordable housing and single-resident rooms maintained even a minimal standard of safety, health, and integrity. Now, all that is felt is the irrepressible pervasiveness of crime and neglect, marked by an increasingly apparent police presence and dwindling housing options for those who still manage to afford monthly rent. Worse, according to long-time residents, the pace of these changes has only accelerated in recent years. While it remains to be seen how the Olympics will ultimately alter the future of the Downtown Eastside, it is becoming increasingly clear that this sad narrative of urban destitution will prevail for years to come.

Thus, if we expect history to prevail in Vancouver's Olympic ordeal, the city's homeless and Downtown Eastside populations can be expected to follow an enervating trajectory. The number of low-income housing evictions and the level of homelessness will be shown to continue to rise leading up to the Olympic Games as social-service funds are diverted towards mega-projects such as improved transportation and stadium venues. In the weeks immediately preceding the opening ceremonies on February 12, 2010, countless homeless citizens will have likely been removed, shunted away, or even temporarily jailed as the city prepares to "tell a story that inspires a world audience of three billion."⁶⁰ And over the months and years following the Games, the impoverished community of the Downtown Eastside, psychologically damaged and widely dispersed, will slowly return to, even surpassing, their previous numbers, as the city and province struggle to sustain its growth and pay off its debts while social services remain neglected. (To put this tremendous burden in perspective, Quebec finished paying off its debt for the 1976 Montreal Summer Olympic Games in 2006.⁶¹)

Even for a self-labeled 'progressive' city like Vancouver, such a scenario is easily foreseeable. On a visit to Vancouver in 2004, then-Governor General Adrienne Clarkson declined an offer from the Anti-Poverty Coalition to tour the city's Downtown Eastside, opting instead for a "sanitized" version offered by then-Mayor Larry Campbell. When protesters alleged that Campbell had "ordered the streets 'cleaned up' of homeless people" in preparation for Her Excellency's visit, he responded, "Was it hosed down? Sure it was. When I was brought up, when people came to visit my house, I had to clean the house."⁶² If such shortsighted attitudes prevail in 2010, the Olympic legacy will certainly spell disaster for the Downtown Eastside community and the city's homeless as a whole.

But there is still hope that Vancouver, unlike countless other host cities, has the potential to put on a gleaming display while meeting the bare minimum of its commitment to protecting and providing for its most vulnerable citizens in the Downtown Eastside. The international media is fully alert to the city's shameful predicament and must not cease inquiry after February. The provincial and

municipal governments are selectively taking steps to fulfill their promise to the community: Vancouver recently increased its fee for converting lodging house rooms into tourist or condominium use to \$15,000 per room, while Campbell has continued his modest push to re-invest in social housing by purchasing existing lodging-houses from the private sector and financing new housing units on publicly-owned lots.⁶³ Perhaps most importantly, recent polls show that a majority of Vancouverites (52 percent) place "social issues" as their top priority, citing "homelessness/poverty" (37 percent) and the "lack of affordable housing" (18 percent) as their number one concerns.⁶⁴ Nevertheless, with targeted bylaws like the Safe Streets Act that prevent citizens from panhandling, "squeegeeing," or "sleeping on sidewalks or in parks,"⁶⁵ and real estate prices climbing new heights, the City of Vancouver and the B.C. Government cannot afford to move lethargically in the aftermath of February 2010.

As Mahatma Gandhi famously said, "The best test of a civilized society is the way in which it treats its most vulnerable and weakest members." In hosting the 2010 Winter Olympic Games, the City of Vancouver faces an uphill battle to protect and enhance the livelihood of an important impoverished community while it avidly prepared for the arrival of the greater international community. Whether or not it was able to rise to that challenge is still to be determined, but the moral imperative of preserving its oldest community has endowed all of Vancouver's citizens with a stake in this struggle. The people of the Downtown Eastside, in contradiction to the marginalized stereotype, are as much, if not more so, a part of a community as their more privileged fellow Vancouverites. The City must find a way to preserve a cornerstone of its history and break the lamentable trend of displacement and disillusion that is already gripping the Downtown Eastside, or else let these Games replicate the disastrous effects seen in countless host cities past.

Notes

- ¹ "The mean streets of Arcadia; Vancouver's homeless." *Economist.com*. The Economist. <http://www.economist.com/Path:WorldPolitics;Americas;November20,2004>. (accessed December 7, 2008).
- ² Chris Koentges, "Olympic Tourism," up! <http://www.up-magazine.com/Path:Magazine;Vancouver;Good'hoods>. (accessed December 9, 2008).
- ³ Street sweeps, as sociologist and Olympic expert Helen Lenskyj describes, involve the forced removal of elements of society deemed disgraceful by the state, whereby 'disadvantage' essentially becomes part of the overall contingent of criminalized activity, Helen Lenskyj, *The Best Olympics Ever?: Social Impacts of Sydney 2000* (Albany, NY: State University of New York Press, 2002): 61-63.
- ⁴ City of Vancouver. Vancouver 2010 Bid Corporation, *Draft: 2010 Winter Olympic Games Inner-City Inclusive Commitment Statement*, 7.
- ⁵ <http://vancouver.ca/commsvcs/PLANNING/dtes/communityhistory.htm>
- ⁶ Cole Harris, "The Lower Mainland, 1820-81," in *Vancouver and Its Region*, 38, ed. by Graeme Wynn and Timothy Oke (Vancouver: UBC Press, 1992), Quoted in Nicholas Blomley, *Unsettling the City: Urban Land and the Politics of Property* (New York, NY: Routledge, 2004), 33-34.
- ⁷ Nicholas Blomley, *Unsettling the City: Urban Land and the Politics of Property* (New York, NY: Routledge), 34.
- ⁸ Government of Canada. Statistics Canada, *Aboriginal Peoples in Canada in 2006: Inuit, Metis, and First Nations, 2006 Census* (Ottawa: Minister of Industry, 2008), 6.
- ⁹ Blomley, *Unsettling the City*, 34.
- ¹⁰ Community History." DTES *Revitalization*. City of Vancouver. <http://vancouver.ca/commsvcs/PLANNING/dtes/communityhistory.htm/> (accessed December 10, 2008).
- ¹¹ Ibid.
- ¹² Blomley, *Unsettling the City*, 34-35.
- ¹³ Poh, Catherine F. et al., "Oral Cancer Screening in a High-Risk Underserved Community – Vancouver Downtown Eastside," *Journal of Health Care for the Poor and Underserved*, 18 (2007): 768
- ¹⁴ City of Vancouver. "Downtown Eastside Community Monitoring Report 1998," 2. <http://edocs.lib.sfu.ca/projects/chodarr/documents/chodarroo35.pdf> (accessed December 8, 2008).
- ¹⁵ Ibid., 15.
- ¹⁶ City of Vancouver, "Downtown Eastside Report 1998," 16.
- ¹⁷ City of Vancouver, "2005/6 Downtown Eastside Community Monitoring Report," 8. <http://vancouver.ca/commsvcs/planning/dtes/pdf/2006MR.pdf> (accessed December 9, 2008).
- ¹⁸ City of Vancouver, "2005/6 Downtown Eastside Report," 10.
- ¹⁹ Ibid., 9.
- ²⁰ Blomley, *Unsettling the City*, 35.
- ²¹ Ibid., 35.
- ²² Ibid., 36.
- ²³ Anne Haila, "The Neglected Builder of Global Cities," in *Global Cities Reader*, ed. by Niel Brenner and Roger Keil (New York, NY: Routledge, 2008), 283-87.
- ²⁴ Only recently slowed by the U.S. housing market collapse and the global recession, Vancouver housing sales have, at the time of writing, seen a strong resurgence in the downtown core. Dave Caldwell, "Preening for the Olympics, Vancouver is Building Up," *New York Times*, December 5, 2008, D6.
- ²⁵ "Global/World Cost of Living Rankings 2008/2009," *Finfacts Ireland*. <http://www.finfacts.com/costofliving.html> (accessed December 9, 2008).
- ²⁶ Maggie Chandler, "Vancouver Average Real Estate Graph," *Chandler Realty*. http://www.affordablevancouverhomes.com/4a_custpage_416.html (accessed December 9, 2008).
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- ²⁸ Woodward, Jim et al., *Regional Homelessness Plan for Greater Vancouver*, 19 March 2001, i.
- ²⁹ Metro Vancouver. Greater Vancouver Regional Steering Committee on Homelessness, *Executive Summary – Still on our streets* (Vancouver, 2008), 2.
- ³⁰ Metro Vancouver, *Executive Summary*, 1.
- ³¹ An excerpt from a recent Economist article: "Homeless panhandlers yell

at theatergoers, while young addicts deal drugs on street corners. They spill out from the Downtown East Side, an area of decrepit boarding houses, sleazy bars and boarded-up shops infamous for the country's highest rates of poverty and drug addiction." "Growing Pains; Canada," *Economist.com*, *The Economist*. <http://www.economist.com/Path:WorldPolitics;Americas;July8,2006>. (accessed December 2, 2008).

³² Cullhane, "Their Spirits Live within Us," 603.

³³ Al Pope, "Adrienne's Tour: four pillars, no roof," *Canadian Dimension*, 38, no.6 (Nov-Dec 2004): 8. The other three pillars are Treatment, Harm-Reduction, and Prevention. It should be noted that In-sight, the nation's first safe drug-injection sight, was a positive outcome of the Harm Reduction effort.

³⁴ "The mean streets of Arcadia." *The Economist*

³⁵ Monte Paulsen, "How to End Homelessness," *The Tyee*. <http://thetyee.ca/Views/2008/12/09/HelpHomeless/> (accessed December 9, 2008).

³⁶ CitySpaces Consulting Ltd. *The Housing Table. Report of the Inner-City Inclusive Housing Table*. March 2007, i. <http://vancouver.ca/commsvcs/housing/pdf/ichousingtablemar07.pdf> (accessed December 9, 2008).

³⁷ City of Vancouver. Vancouver 2010 Bid Corporation, *2010 Winter Olympic Games Inner-City Inclusive Commitment Statement*, 1. <http://vancouver.ca/commsvcs/housing/sra/pdf/statement.pdf> (accessed December 9, 2008).

³⁸ David Eby and Christopher Misura, *Cracks in the Foundation: Solving the Housing Crisis in Canada's Poorest Neighborhood* (Vancouver: Pivot Legal Society, 2006), iv.

³⁹ Frances Bula, "\$1B Olympic housing challenge," *The Vancouver Sun*, March 3, 2007, A1. These measures include increasing welfare rates by 50%, providing over 3000 new low-income housing units, 300 temporary shelter beds for young people who "flock to the city during the Games," and increasing subsidies for the 250 social-housing units in the Olympic Village to increase their affordability. For comparative purposes, VANOC released an updated budget the same year, including a \$1.63 billion Operating Budget and a \$580 million Capital Budget.

⁴⁰ "News Release: Province to protect 996 affordable housing units." B.C. Government. Province of British Columbia. http://www2.news.gov.bc.ca/news_releases_2005-2009/2007OTP0033-000382.htm (accessed December 11, 2008). Interestingly, The price of providing permanent housing for an individual homeless person is estimated at approximately \$22,000 to \$28,000 per year, whereas the cost of providing services such as "hospital, ambulance, police incarceration, emergency shelter, and food aid" is estimated at \$40,000 per year. Providing housing for all homeless would save taxpayers between \$10.3 million and \$15.5 million per year. (See: Eby and Misura, *Cracks in the Foundation*, iv).

⁴¹ Caldwell, "Preening for the Olympics, Vancouver is Building Up," D6.

⁴² Saskia Sassen, "Whose City is it?" in *Global Cities Reader*, ed. by Niel Brenner and Roger Keil (New York: Routledge, 2008), 360.

⁴³ Michael Smyth, "Street People Won't Be Hidden in 2010," *The Province*. <http://www.homelessnation.org/en/node/12931/> (accessed December 2, 2008).

⁴⁴ International Olympic Committee, *Olympic Charter* (Laussane, Switzerland: International Olympic Committee, 2007), 98. http://multimedia.olympic.org/pdf/en_report_122.pdf (accessed December 5, 2008).

⁴⁵ Harm de Blij, *The Power of Place: Geography, Destiny, and Globalization's Rough Landscape* (New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 2009), 203.

⁴⁶ Jeff Lee, "Campbell put on the spot by Chinese journalists," *Vancouver Sun*. <http://www.homelessnation.org/en/node/12915/> (accessed December 9, 2008).

⁴⁷ Smyth, "Street People Won't Be Hidden in 2010."

⁴⁸ Lee, "Campbell put on the spot."

⁴⁹ Helen J. Lenskyj, "The Olympic (Affordable) Housing Legacy and Social Responsibility," 192. <http://www.la84foundation.org/SportsLibrary/ISOR/ISOR2006r.pdf> (accessed December 11, 2008).

⁵⁰ Lenskyj, "The Olympic (Affordable) Housing Legacy," 193.

⁵¹ "The mayor's 'Olympic Vision' threatened years of work on the part of grassroots organizers who had been developing affordable housing and health care for homeless families, artists, and craftspeople in a blighted downtown neighborhood that Olympic boosters had earmarked for a speed

skating oval.” Ibid., 194.

⁵² Ibid., 194.

⁵³ “Olympic Cities Punish Poor.” *Georgia Straight*. <http://www.straight.com/olympic-cities-punish-poor/> (accessed December 11, 2008).

⁵⁴ Lenskyj, “Olympic (Affordable) Housing Legacy,” 194.

⁵⁵ Anita Beaty, *Atlanta’s Olympic Legacy* (Geneva: Centre on Housing Rights and Evictions, 2007), 30.

⁵⁶ Beaty, *Atlanta’s Olympic Legacy*, 32..

⁵⁷ Ibid., 32.

⁵⁸ Culhane, “Their Spirits Live within Us,” 596.

⁵⁹ The Economist has consistently ranked Vancouver as the “most livable city in the world,” noting that only “petty crime” has prevented it from achieving a perfect score of 100. See “Vancouver remains the most liveable city; Harare is still intolerable.” *Economist.com* The Economist. www.economist.com/Path:MarketsandData;Rankings. (accessed December 8, 2008).

⁶⁰ Government of Canada. Canadian Heritage, News Release: *Vancouver 2010 Opening Ceremony to “Inspire the World”* <http://www.pch.gc.ca/newsroom/Path:English;2002;February> (accessed November 27, 2008).

⁶¹ “Quebec’s Big Owe stadium debt is over.” CBC.ca, CBC. <http://www.cbc.ca/Path:Canada;Montreal;Dec.19,2006>. (accessed December 8, 2008).

⁶² Pope, “Adrienne’s Tour,” 8.

⁶³ David Eby, “Introduction,” in *Special Report on Housing Solutions for the Downtown Eastside*, ed. by Iva Cheung (Vancouver: Pivot Legal Society, 2008), 2.

⁶⁴ Neal Hall, “Homelessness, poverty top issues in Vancouver: poll,” *Vancouver Sun*. <http://www.canada.com/Path:VancouverSun;News;September12,2008>. (accessed December 1, 2008).

⁶⁵ David Hogben, “Bylaws preventing homeless from seeking shelter in Vancouver parks ‘unconstitutional,’ housing advocate says,” *Victoria Times Colonist*. <http://www.canada.com/Path:VictoriaTimesColonist;News;October17,2008>. (accessed December 5, 2008)