Vancouver’s Downtown Eastside and the Community of Clients

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Abstract
This paper examines how the community of the Downtown Eastside (DES) is constructed historically as well as currently as the disordered foil to Vancouver’s public image as a city of beauty and order. For much of the city’s history, the area has been the location for those shunned by the mainstream. A concentrated community of poverty and abjection grew up, a place for people who could not afford or were not allowed options. In the 1970s and 80s, activists organized to advocate for this abject community’s identity and needs, but at the expense of confirming the area’s status as the ‘natural’ home for the socially neglected and undesirable. The latter 1990s saw the much-publicized, drug-fuelled explosion of HIV. Community-based researchers and service providers became the officially-recognized spokespeople for those populations deemed incompetent to speak for or represent themselves. Community development became negotiations between these neo-liberal ‘stakeholders’ and the commercial and government bodies wanting to re-develop the area and contain its problematic occupants. Socially marginal residents have been re-classified as ‘clients’ and have been assigned to the custody of community services. With the permission of the official community stakeholders, the DTES has been re-colonized by ‘citizens’ -- artists, condo owners and businesses -- who are lauded for their ‘revitalization’ of the DTES into a healthy community. The DTES is now becoming a series of gated, exclusive communities which make use the remaining poor as advertisements for enlightened, caring social management.
The man is dancing and watching his reflection in the window, humming to music only he can hear and oblivious to the small group of visitors walking past. We’re making our way through Vancouver’s Downtown Eastside, widely considered the worst neighbourhood in Canada. A man brings his bike inside before taking a yoga class at the Karma Teachers yoga studio, in the alley behind Hastings St., where people pay what they can afford. (Jennifer Allford). Along with visiting several social enterprises, the tour of the Downtown Eastside includes a quick stop at a faded mural on the side of a social housing building. (Jennifer Allford). The City of Vancouver voted to approve their local area plan with several amendments for the Downtown Eastside Saturday. The new plan will be developed in partnership with the DTES Neighbourhood Council, Building Community Society and the Local Area Planning committee. “The Downtown Eastside Local Area Plan represents a thoughtful, balanced, and resident-driven vision for Vancouver’s oldest and most diverse neighbourhood,” said Vancouver mayor Gregor Robertson. “This plan reflects residents’ aspirations for a community with safer and more stable housing, protections for low-income residents, stronger support for mental health and addictions, and a more vibrant local economy.”