

Gentrification in Vancouver: Displacing the East End

Brenna Fynes

Headlines in January of this year announcing that the Waldorf Hotel had been sold to a condo developer sparked discussions about the issue of gentrification in Vancouver.¹ One particular article in the *Globe and Mail* called the closing of the Waldorf a “gutting” of Vancouver’s art scene.² These articles fail to note that the hotel has been centre of local art and culture for only a little over two years. Before its recent incarnation, the Waldorf had previously been a working-class hangout. Even so, the closing of the Waldorf is not an isolated incident. It is indicative of a process that has been happening in Vancouver for decades.

Commercial Drive, the heart of East Vancouver is another space that has undergone similar changes over a longer period of time. The Drive, as it is casually referred to today, is known as the “wildly entertaining, multicultural, multi-ethnic, multi-sexual

district”³ of Vancouver. This melting pot of funky small businesses, political activism, environmentalism, artists, bohemians,⁴ and LGBTQ communities exists in what used to be a predominantly working-class neighbourhood. Houses here were cheap and places of employment such as docks, wharves, mills, and the sugar refinery were within walking distance.⁵ After the Second World War many immigrants, most notably Italians settled in the area, establishing the neighbourhood as Vancouver’s Little Italy. However, in the 1970s and 1980s a new group of migrants arrived on the scene and initiated major changes to the socio-cultural landscape.

Kitsification

The term *gentrification* has many defining characteristics but most generally it is the process in which more affluent, and largely white populations move into areas of lower socio-economic status, revitalizing homes and businesses, which then leads to an increase in real estate prices and taxes. Not only does the area become less affordable for earlier

¹ Tania Ehret, “From the Waldorf to W2: Vancouver’s disappearing arts and community spaces,” *Rabble*, February 1, 2013,

<http://rabble.ca/news/2013/02/waldorf-w2-vancouver-disappearing-arts-and-community-spaces>.

² Marsha Lederman, “Waldorf closing a ‘gutting’ of art scene,” *The Globe and Mail*, January 11, 2013, <http://www.theglobeandmail.com/news/british-columbia/waldorf-closing-a-gutting-of-arts-scene/article7278639/>

³ Jak King, *The Drive: A Retail, Social and Political History of Commercial Drive, Vancouver, to 1956* (Vancouver: The Drive Press, 2011), 1.

⁴ “Neighbourhoods: Commercial Drive,” accessed February 1, 2013, bcliving.ca.

⁵ Patricia E. Roy, *Vancouver: An Illustrated History*, (Toronto: James Lorimer & Company, 1980), 60.

inhabitants but often family homes are destroyed to make way for large blocks of condominiums, displacing families and drastically changing the landscape.⁶ The process of gentrification is initiated by an influx of what are called the “urban pioneers”⁷- artists, students, single parents, first-time home-buyers, and others. In most cases these newcomers are less affluent than later migrants, but tend to initiate spatial changes that reflect their values.

In the 1960s and 1970s, the demographic effects of the baby boom were palpable in cities across Canada.⁸ Thousands of young people left the suburbs and poured into the cities. In the second half of the 1960s the number of young adults aged 20-24 in the West End of Vancouver and Kitsilano increased by over 7000.⁹ Emerging from this new youth was the hippie movement based on communal living, environmentalism, and art.¹⁰ Hippies congregated in urban spaces where they could feel free from the confines of their middle-class upbringings.¹¹ Kitsilano was one of the first “youth neighbourhoods” in Canada, second only to Yorkville in Toronto.¹² By the late 60s however, hippie central was undergoing a rapid turnover. Artists are the “colonizing arm” of the middle-class, especially in the realm of inner-city gentrification. Where the artists go (in

Vancouver’s case artists are often synonymous with or closely related to hippies) the middle-class surely follows.¹³ Student, communal housing, and old apartments in Kitsilano were quickly being replaced with luxury condo buildings,¹⁴ and many hippies were forced out of the area due to rising real estate prices¹⁵- a process that is now sometimes referred to sardonically in Vancouver as ‘Kitsification.’ By the 1970s many hippies had migrated east to set up a ‘new Kitsilano.’

Soon Commercial Drive had effectively become the new community for young people. The surrounding Grandview-Woodland neighbourhood had a quickly growing population in the age range of 24-34 and local residents had noticed an increase in “students, quasi-artists, and punk-rockers.”¹⁶ In addition to the freedom loving hippies and artists, politically minded students moved into the area for the affordable and accessible housing, close to three new educational institutions: Simon Fraser University and Vancouver Community College were both founded in 1965 and Langara community college which opened in 1970. Cheaper rent especially co-op housing also attracted single mothers and lesbians.¹⁷

⁶ Larry Knopp, “Gentrification,” in *The Encyclopedia of Human Geography*, ed. Barney Warf (Thousand Oaks, CA: SAGE Publications, 2006), 179-181.

⁷ David Ley, “Gentrification,” in *The Dictionary of Human Geography 5th ed.*, ed. Derick Gregory et al. (Hoboken: Wiley-Blackwell, 2009), 273-4.

⁸ David Ley, *The New Middle Class and the Making of the Central City* (Oxford University Press, 1996), 182.

⁹ Ibid.

¹⁰ Roy, 162.

¹¹ Ley, *The New Middle Class*, 183.

¹² Ibid.

¹³ Ibid., 192.

¹⁴ Ibid.

¹⁵ Lawrence Aronsen, *City of Love and Revolution: Vancouver in the Sixties*, (Vancouver: New Star Books, 2010), 29.

¹⁶ Britannia Community Service Centre, “The People of Grandview-Woodland and Strathcona: A community profile,” (Vancouver: 1984), 52.

¹⁷ Aronsen, 33.



'Joes' by Lorraine Gilbert, from the series *Montreal and Vancouver Night Works*- this image was taken in Vancouver between 1979 and 1982 on Commercial Drive.

Hippie Business

A major symptom of gentrification is the change to the social and cultural landscape through the establishment of newcomer businesses. Changes to the community on the Drive first became evident in the 1970s when the urban pioneers began establishing spaces for themselves that had overlapping themes of social and political activism such as Vancouver Free University, community book stores, co-op businesses, and coffee houses.

Coffee bars were already an established part of the local Italian and Portuguese "bachelor"¹⁸ sub-culture on the Drive but the invasion of the counter-culture changed and reshaped this social past time. Some existing coffee bars changed in order to appeal to the new clientele and others were established by the newcomers to serve their own needs. "Joe's" coffee shop on Commercial and Williams St.

¹⁸ Bradley Grant Jackson, "Social Worlds in Transition: Neighbourhood Change in Grandview-Woodland, Vancouver," (MA thesis University of Bristol, 1981), 161.

once called Touriera Cafe, after a makeover and a name change, became a popular hangout for artists, poets, and feminists¹⁹- a stark contrast to the previously heterosexual male-oriented atmosphere. La Quena a “non-profit,” “non-sexist” coffee shop created by the Canadian Latin American Cultural Society,²⁰ provided a space for those interested in labour and Latin American issues to meet and share ideas.²¹ Coffee shops were important social spaces where the counter-culture integrated with their hosts and also established their own sense of community.

Newly established bookstores also provided meet up spaces for those interested in social and political issues, along with providing the corresponding literature. The People’s Co-op Bookstore established in the 80s still holds community events today, with lectures on topics such as “non-violent resistance to the Israeli occupation.”²² As a co-op, it was also part of a larger trend of community oriented retail spaces like second hand clothing stores, and food co-ops,²³ which remain alive and well today.

Another important place where engaged citizens could meet, learn, and discuss was Vancouver Free University. Established in 1969 in an old, deconsecrated church on Venables street (and later relocated on Commercial Drive) the Free U was part of a movement spreading across North America meant to connect local communities, in this case both established and emerging, to new, innovative,

and radical ideas. The Free U provided vocational training and a forum for activism, spiritualism, and the quest for knowledge.²⁴ The mandate was to create a “milieu in which real learning and growth can take place”...free of grades, exams, and “market-place guilt to get your money’s worth.”²⁵ Students could take classes at the Free U in far ranging topics such as communal living, natural childbirth, meditation, yoga, parliamentary procedure, revolutionary thought, and women only consciousness-raising.

Perhaps the most significant manifestation of gentrification on to the Drive was, unlike previous communities, the residential changes that followed the commercial changes. The original working-class commercial centre and the later Italian-oriented businesses along the Drive developed out of the needs of the working-class community who all resided nearby. However, the businesses that were established by the counter-culture were largely dependent upon city-wide participation, and the corresponding community then followed.²⁶ The Vancouver East Cultural Centre was one institution established just off the Drive that depended on city-wide patronage but acted as an anchor for residential colonization. A few employees moved into the neighbourhood after the centre had been established and then urged several of their friends to follow shortly thereafter.²⁷

¹⁹ Jackson, 163.

²⁰ Ibid., 164.

²¹ Ibid., 163.

²² “Literary: Maxine Kaufman-Lacusta's talk on Palestine @ People's Co-op Books,” *Commercial Drive-Live!* (blog), November 7 2012, <http://thedriverisalive.blogspot.ca>.

²³ Jackson, 159.

²⁴ Aronsen, 33.

²⁵ “Free University Collection”, Vancouver City Archives, 974-D-4, file 5.

²⁶ Jackson, 166.

²⁷ Jackson, 157.

The New Neighbours

Gentrification is a major concern for policy makers for the fact that it creates a lack of affordable housing. David Ley points out in his article "Gentrification: A Ten Year Overview," that middle-class resettlement of the inner city and the crisis of affordable housing are "two sides of the same coin."²⁸ Vancouver is one of the most gentrified cities in all of Canada, so it should come as no surprise that it also has the least amount of affordable housing and some of the worst poverty in the country.²⁹ One reason for this is the expansion of a white-collar economy in Vancouver; many of the professional industries of the metro area are concentrated in the downtown core which has created a demand for inner-city living.³⁰ Vancouver's housing market has been facing affordability and accessibility issues for a long time, but they intensified considerably during the real estate booms of the 1970s and 80s. From 1973-76, 2400 rental units were demolished, and another 1000 were lost per year in the inner city alone between 1976 and 1981.³¹

During the real estate boom of the 1970s Grandview-Woodland remained relatively safe compared to other areas of the city that lost thousands of low-income rental units. Residential changes took a while to catch up to the neighbourhood renewal taking place because, at first, there was enough space to accommodate the newcomers. More than double the condos were built in other areas

such as Kitsilano and Fairview during the real estate upswing of the early 70s than those built in Grandview-Woodland.³² Large portions of the neighbourhood's apartment-zoned areas remained undeveloped well into the 80s.³³ Development companies felt that the area was too risky, lots were too small, too many owners were un-willing to sell necessary property, and there was just not yet a demand for more rental units.³⁴

It was not until more recent decades, that residential changes on the Drive have become significant. Real estate prices for Grandview-Woodland have more than tripled in the last fifteen years alone.³⁵ When the newcomers arrived, many opted to buy single-family homes and convert them into suites.³⁶ This phase in the process of gentrification establishes the changes that occur later like large scale, corporate developments. Earlier migrants in the lower middle classes and trade industries often complete renovations and upgrades to old houses on a smaller scale with their own money, usually less than \$20,000, and use their own labour. Once this trend is established, higher income people come in and spend larger amounts of money to demolish and rebuild or totally renovate a dwelling. Then, the risk to development companies declines and they begin to invest in large-scale projects.³⁷

When rental units were being demolished in other parts of the city, the

²⁸ David Ley, "Gentrification: A Ten Year Overview" in *The Canadian City*, ed. Kent Gercke (Montreal: Black Rose Books, 1991), 182.

²⁹ Jane L. Boyd, "Gentrification and playful disregard," *Resources for Feminist Research*, 33, no.1, (2008).

³⁰ Ley, "Gentrification: A Ten Year Overview," 183.

³¹ *Ibid.*, 192.

³² Jackson, 173.

³³ *Ibid.*, 174.

³⁴ *Ibid.*

³⁵ Kelly Sinoski, "Housing costs haven't driven out Commercial Drive's problems," *Vancouver Sun*, April 6, 2008, <http://www.canada.com/vancouver/news/story.html?id=df95743d-f0f5-4498-bcc1-663a4d56fec8>.

³⁶ Jackson, 179-181.

³⁷ Ley, "Gentrification: A Ten Year Overview," 188.

residents who could not afford the new rent, and otherwise displaced peoples, moved to the much more affordable east.³⁸ Many first-time home buyers converted single-family dwellings in to suites. Not only did conversions help to lower the cost of a mortgage, but these renovations also contributed positively to the neighbourhood status quo by maintaining a family-oriented community feel and creating more rental spaces, which continued to offset the need for condos.³⁹

An increase in co-op and communal housing was another noticeable change to the residential landscape.⁴⁰ 1550 Woodland Drive was once “Sitka” a women’s only co-operative house, and home to great parties and vegetarian barbecues.⁴¹ Single-parent homes headed by women were also on the rise in the area, some of whom were also lesbian. The affordability of the east was attractive to single-mothers and lesbians because both tend to be on the lower end of the socio-economic scale due to gendered income disparities. In addition, these minority groups tend to migrate to areas where there is community support.⁴²

The Personal is Political

The respondents of a 1984 Community Profile created by Britannia Community Services Centre consistently noticed that with the new population came an increase in political

activism, especially by women. The changes to the business along the Drive had marked themes of activism and organizing. La Quena, for one example, was more than just a coffee shop or political meet up space: it was also a major player in the Drive’s larger political community. In the summer of 1989, the co-operative coffee house co-sponsored the tenth anniversary celebration of the Nicaraguan revolution. The large-scale event held in Grandview Park was tagged by the Vancouver Sun as “the biggest leftist bash in the country.”⁴³

Commercial Drive has also been an important space for both the feminist and lesbian movements, although Vancouver’s lesbian community is less spatially defined than the gay community is in the West End.⁴⁴ In 1984, Bet Cecil and four other women created the Vancouver Lesbian Connection on the Drive, a “political, service and social organization for lesbian and bisexual women.”⁴⁵ According to one lesbian activist and long-time resident of the Drive, in the 80s it was the “dyke place to be” and a “hub of lesbian activity.”⁴⁶ Keeping with the tradition of businesses that doubled as political hotspots, the Book Mantel, which opened on the Drive in 1988, was a book store, coffee shop and place of note for lesbian activists to gather. Other coffee shops on the Drive pioneered the concept of queer friendly spaces. ‘Josephine’s’ was the tongue-in-cheek name of a spot that opened just across the street from the famous Joe’s in response to an incident of two women being asked to leave for kissing. ‘Harry’s’ flew rainbow flags over the

³⁸ Jackson, 184.

³⁹ Ibid., 185.

⁴⁰ Britannia Community Service Centre, 56.

⁴¹ James Loewen, “A Trip down Commercial Drive’s queer memory lane”, *EXTRA!* October 29, 2007, http://www.xtra.ca/public/Vancouver/A_trip_down_Commercial_Drives_queer_memory_lane-3814.aspx.

⁴² Britannia Community Service Centre, 49.

⁴³ Jeff Buttle, “Leftist bash to mark 10th anniversary of Nicaraguan revolt,” *The Vancouver Sun*, July 19, 1989.

⁴⁴ King, 1.

⁴⁵ Loewen.

⁴⁶ Ibid.

door and displayed the slogan “we’re open.”⁴⁷ The new community on Commercial Drive continued to push the conservative buttons of the city with events like the original Dyke March, and Grandview Park held the second Stonewall Festival as an act of solidarity between lesbian and gay organizers after the event had been pushed out of the West End in its first year.

What this means for Vancouver today

Space is never static; neighbourhoods are always in flux, and evolving with the various waves of inhabitants. Not unlike the Waldorf, Commercial Drive provides an example of how displacement tends to have a layering effect where the upper-middle class move in on the lower-middle class, who had moved in on the working class. When neighbourhoods undergo renewal there are often benefits to be had such as improved buildings, reduced levels of crime and other social problems, as well as better services. Longer-term residents can also gain upward mobility by becoming landlords of both residential and commercial spaces. However, lower-income residents do not always benefit from these changes and often end up pushed out of the neighbourhood. Gentrification, inherently, is about displacement.

It was the displacement of the hippies from Kitsilano that instigated the migration of the counter-culture toward the east end, and everywhere they have gone since, condos and high-end stores have followed. The urban pioneers of the Drive opened business such as bookstores and coffee shops, fixed up old houses, and left their mark on the political character of the Drive as an open and fun-loving

space that has lasted into the twenty-first century. However, in so doing they also initiated the displacement of longer standing businesses and the longer standing history of the area, and their own eventual displacement from a neighbourhood that had become their own. Aside from the Italian Day street festival held on Commercial Drive and a few remaining business, the Italian influence in Little Italy is barely recognizable today. Perhaps the presence of hippies and artists will be the next to go; in the place of radical bookstores and coffee shops may soon stand condos and office towers that would turn the Drive into a carbon copy of the downtown core. What once was the gateway for the working-class and new immigrants into the city is now the gateway out: the last frontier for those who want to buy a house but still stay in the city.

In another recent *Globe and Mail* article, a Waldorf staff member noted the irony that they were being pushed out of an area that they helped reinvigorate.⁴⁸ An even greater irony is that when the hotel re-opened in 2010 there was far less concern for the people who were being pushed out of a neighbourhood they had inhabited for a much longer period of time. At least in the case of the Drive, urban pioneers enjoyed decades in the area before condos starting going up, but for the Waldorf and its surrounding neighbourhood this process is happening more rapidly. When we see gentrification occurring in Vancouver today, it can be contextualized as one aspect of something that has been occurring since the

⁴⁷ Ibid.

⁴⁸ Frances Bula and Marsha Lederman, “Patrons lament Waldorf closing,” *The Globe and Mail*, January 9, 2013, <http://www.theglobeandmail.com/news/british-columbia/patrons-lament-waldorf-closing/article7139364/>.

early 1970s. When gentrification takes place it is important to think about who is being displaced and from where.

Bibliography

Aronsen, Lawrence. *City of Love and Revolution: Vancouver in the Sixties*. Vancouver: New Star Books, 2010.

Boyd, Jane L. "Gentrification and playful disregard." *Resources for Feminist Research*, 33, no.1, (2008).

Brittania Community Service Centre, "The People of Grandview-Woodland and Strathcona: A community profile." Vancouver: 1984.

Bula, Francis and Marsha Lederman, "Patrons lament Waldorf closing." *The Globe and Mail*, January 9, 2013.
<http://www.theglobeandmail.com/news/british-columbia/patrons-lament-waldorf-closing/article7139364/>.

Buttle, Jeff. "Leftist bash to mark 10th anniversary of Nicuraguan revolt." *The Vancouver Sun*, July 19, 1989.

Ehret, Tania. "From the Waldorf to W2: Vancouver's disappearing arts and community spaces." *Rabble*, February 1, 2013,
<http://rabble.ca/news/2013/02/waldorf-w2-vancouver-disappearing-arts-and-community-spaces>.

"Free University Collection." Vancouver City Archives. 974-D-4, file 5.

Jackson, Bradley Grant. "Social worlds in transition: neighbourhood change in Grandview-Woodland, Vancouver." MA Thesis, University of Bristol, 1981.

King, Jak. *The Drive: A Retail, Social and Political History of Commercial Drive, Vancouver, to 1956*. Vancouver: The Drive Press, 2011.

Knopp, Larry. "Gentrification". *Encyclopedia of Human Geography*. Sage, 2006.

Lederman, Marsha. "Waldorf closing a 'gutting' of art scene." *The Globe and Mail*, January 11, 2013.
<http://www.theglobeandmail.com/news/british-columbia/waldorf-closing-a-gutting-of-arts-scene/article7278639/>.

Ley, David. "Gentrification." In *The Dictionary of Human Geography 5th ed.*, ed. Derick Gregory et al. Hoboken: Wiley-Blackwell, 2009.

—. *The New Middle Class and the Remaking of the Central City*. Oxford University Press, 1996.

—. "Gentrification: A Ten Year Overview" in *The Canadian City*. Ed. Kent Gercke. Montreal: Black Rose Books, 1991.

"Literary: Maxine Kaufman-Lacusta's talk on Palestine @ People's Co-op Books." *Commercial Drive- Live!* (blog). November 7 2012.
<http://thedriverisalive.blogspot.ca>.

Loewen, James. "A Trip down Commercial Drive's queer memory lane." *EXTRA!* October 29, 2007.
http://www.xtra.ca/public/Vancouver/A_trip_down_Commercial_Drives_queer_memory_lane-3814.aspx.

McDonald, Robert A.J. and Jean Barman. *Vancouver Past: Essays in Social History*. Vancouver: UBC Press, 1986.

"Neighbourhoods: Commercial Drive," accessed February 1, 2013, bcliving.ca.

Roy, Patricia E. *Vancouver: An Illustrated History*. Toronto: James Lorimer & Company, 1980.

Sinoski, Kelly. "Housing costs haven't driven out Commercial Drive's problems." *Vancouver Sun*, April 6, 2008.