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West End Memories

How have the residences, social places, and other social activities of West End youth changed over the decades?

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Vancouver's West End has evolved from an upper class community of single family homes from its earliest days to a densely populated high-rise community that was stated as generally unsuitable for children in a 1969 study. Nevertheless, this has not prevented youth from enjoying full childhoods in the West End, which has retained its strengths as a "magical square mile" in the present day with a diverse community and convenience to Downtown Vancouver. I critically examine two aspects of the West End that no longer exist today, a boy's memory of Robsonstrasse and prostitution on Davie street from a documentary which showed the struggles of many young people who came to the area in order to make ends meet.

West End Memories of youth: A social Geography

Contained on two sides by water and anchored in the west by Stanley Park, it was a magical square mile, a geography unmatched in any other neighbourhood in the city, a safe environment that offered kids a range of opportunities for fun and adventure limited only by our imaginations. Bob Adamson

I begin this essay with a brief childhood memory about the West End that describes it as a “magical square mile”.¹ This description is particularly striking in the enduring power of this statement. Even though this specific memory is from over a half century ago, the geographical features of this community that makes it “magic” still rings true to this day. Elements of the city’s natural past are carefully preserved to this day in the West End where visitors can still stroll next to Victorian heritage homes in stark contrast to the glass high-rise towers visible only blocks away. As Vancouver’s earliest residential gridded neighbourhood, the West End has gone through various stages of growth, prosperity, decay, and revitalization in its history that that could span the lifetime of one person who grew up in a Victorian mansion and lived to see it develop to one of the most densely populated neighbourhoods in North America. Yet even through these changes there are aspects of the West End that have remained the same. Stanley Park is still the forested park preserve that it was over a century ago. Beachgoers in English Bay

¹ Quotations collected by Gary Pennington, my community partner for this project and initiator of the West End Memories Project. Complete audio versions are archived on the Vancouver Public Library’s online exhibit “West End Stories: Growing up in the Magic Square Mile” <http://pwp.vpl.ca/westendstories/growing-up-in-themagic-square-mile/>

still relax by the water with the same open views that Vancouverites have enjoyed when the first homes were built on the downtown peninsula. It is notable that many natural aspects of Vancouver has stayed the same while the constructed urban landscape around has changed more. In this project, I will explain how the West End has started as a tranquil residential neighbourhood to one that transformed into a socially mixed community. The resulting densification added to its reputation as a place not ideal for children in the 1960s, along with its increased social problems. I conclude that a visit to the West End today will confirm that previous concerns about the West End no longer being a place for children at all are unrealized.

Is the West End a suitable place for children?

A critical report titled "The West End of Vancouver: A Social Profile", prepared in collaboration with the Vancouver department of social planning and community development in 1969 has much to comment on the unsuitability of the community as a place to raise children. Negative factors cited included the many restrictions apartment living placed on children, insufficient open spaces, and the "density of population in the area and less than ideal home environment result in many socially maladjusted children".² However, certain positives were also noted, including accessibility to cultural institutions, Stanley Park, and beaches. Despite the large acreage of Stanley Park, it is inferred that the West End lacks smaller open spaces with neighbourhood park facilities. The general consensus stated by the city report was that families with children lived in the area out of necessity rather than by choice. The report acknowledges

²Page 56, Patillo, R.W. "The West End of Vancouver: A Social Profile". City of Vancouver Department of Social Planning and Community Development, 1969. Print.

that the West End of the 1960s had undergone many changes in its built environment following the urbanization of Vancouver in ways that were not complimentary to the livelihood of children. Negative descriptions such as “an overcrowded high-rise jungle” were broadly given to the West End landscape. Moreover, the most frequent responses from residents included “alienation, loneliness, and isolation” as well as, curiously the generalization of “no children”.³ How do we reconcile these official findings with the memories of participants who saw the West End as a “magical square mile”? There appears to be a marked correlation between increasing urban densification and the perception of the West End as an ideal place for raising children. This idea was reflected in the “exodus” of middle and upper class families following the First World War when returning soldiers and immigrants moved in large numbers into the West End homes. Due to this housing shortage, many former single family homes were converted into rooming homes and it resulted in the majority of families going into newer spacious neighbourhoods in other parts of Vancouver.⁴ Due to this transition, many former West End youth became Shaughnessy and Point Grey youths, drastically shifting the demographics of the West End. To explore deeper into the childhood memories of the West End, it is crucial to hear the recollections of the children who remember the time when the West End was mostly for families.

³ Ibid, 58

⁴ Jackson, Carol. “West End Exodus.” Unpublished Planning 425 Essay, U of British Columbia, 1972. UBC Special Collections

Victorian West End

A chancellor of Simon Fraser University in his later years, Kenneth Caple was born in 1903 in a house built by his father Norman in 1888 who was a photographer for the Canadian Pacific Railway. Even though he was unable to provide accurate dates in this tape recorded 1984 interview from the Vancouver Historical Society, he remembered stories like how children were warned to stay away from the squatters who loitered on boats around False Creek.⁵ Vancouver north of False Creek was a fog covered city filled with hazy smoke from industrial sawmills. This is one of the more drastic changes in Vancouver's urban structure as most of False Creek has become deindustrialized following gradual shifting of the city's economy. Fishing in False Creek was a popular pastime as there was plenty of sea trout and flounder, in addition to game hunting opportunities on the rest of the forested Vancouver peninsula. Kenneth's father would have arrived in a Vancouver similar to what was depicted in the following 1888 illustrated map (Fig.1). The West End was a forest labelled "Heavily timbered and swampy" before it became a neighbourhood and note how the original False Creek extended far into East Vancouver. Kenneth recalled 11am Sunday morning church services as a major parts of community life, in which he wore a sailor suit. Churches, from Christ Church to Holy Rosary Cathedral along with their respective religious schools, such as St. Ann's Academy on Dunsmuir Street were a part of childhood memories in early Vancouver that continued into the 20th century. At home,

⁵ Interview with Kenneth Caple by Irene Howard. "Childhood Memories of False Creek." Tape cassette recording. Vancouver Historical Society Oral History Project, 1984.

Kenneth's family hired Chinese servants to help out with family duties such as cooking, which signalled a different standard of living for middle class at the time.



Fig.1) 1886 Map of Vancouver drawn after the Great Fire (Map of Vancouver fire, 1886, drawn in the 1930s by JS Mathews based on first-hand accounts⁶)

The meaning of the West End has greatly shifted from its Victorian age status, documented in Angus Robertson's geography thesis, "Pursuit of Power, Profit, and Privacy: a study of Vancouver's West End Elite". Robertson argues that the West End elite created a residential landscape that reflected the architecture, institutions, and urban ideas of the Victorian era. From my own research at the Roedde House Museum in Barclay Heritage Square, to Kenneth Caple's oral history, I could agree that middle class lifestyle in the early days of the West End was relatively comfortable in this period of growth that lasted until 1914.

Gustav Roedde and his family emigrated from Germany and settled into their home built in 1893. The house museum today showcases what the home looked like when it was a single

⁶ 52, Hayes, Derek. Historical Atlas of Vancouver and the Lower Fraser Valley. Vancouver: Douglas & McIntyre, 2005. Print.

family home under the Roedde ownership. Even though the architecture has been attributed to Francis Rattenbury, known for designing the British Columbia parliament buildings, their house was considered to be middle class, as there were far grander homes in other parts of the West End such as lavish, single family estates along English Bay and Stanley Park.⁷ The stage of the preserved home today aims to capture a favourable vision of family unity in early Vancouver when the city experienced growth, rather than the subsequent housing shortages of the 1920s in the area transformed single family homes into multiple-dwelling based units.⁸

Interpreting Robsonstrasse

A 1964 archival video from the CBC archives shows a stretch of commercial road lined up with vibrant storefronts displaying signs such as “European News”, “Austria Shoe Salon”, and stacks of newspapers headlined in German.⁹ In addition to the many German restaurants, nightclubs, and deli shops, the “Schnitzel Haus” served German food by girls in Dirndl dresses in an authentic traditional atmosphere.¹⁰ The Youtube uploader on the BC History channel recalls:

When I was a kid in Vancouver Robson Street west of Howe was full of shops run by German immigrants and called Robsonstrasse. I often went there on Saturdays with my grandmother after having been at Stanley Park

⁷ 17, Robertson, Angus E. “The Pursuit of Power, Profit and Privacy: A Study of Vancouver’s West End Elite 1886-1914.” MA Thesis, U of British Columbia, 1977.

⁸ 20, Bjornson, Michael. “A History of the West End comparing Changing Lifestyles with Changing Environment”. Dissertation for Architecture, U of British Columbia, 1970.

⁹ Robson Street Stores aired in black and white on the CBC Vancouver show, “Town Crier”, July 1964. Clip accessed at <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=6EflBbYFzJ8>

¹⁰ “The way we were”, Memory submitted by Edie Williams on CBC’s Hyperlocal Site: <http://hyperlocal.cbc.ca/mediadetail/10926423-Vancouver%20-%20the%20way%20we%20were!?offset=92>

One day when I was about 10 I decided to see how far I could get speaking German and not only did it work in every store I went into with my grandmother, it worked with many of the people in the street.

My grandmother did not approve of me doing this; she felt that in public you should only speak a language everyone could understand because it was rude to make people feel left out. I did point out that it seemed almost everyone could understand German on the street, but I was being a ten year-old smart ass.¹¹ (Fig.2)



(Fig.2 Screenshot from "Robsonstrasse")

In the same way that Chinatown provided a home for Chinese immigrants, German immigrants felt at home in Robsonstrasse, what the neighbourhood was known in the mid-20th century. I took the same walk up Robson Street in 2015 and with the exception of one grocery store, did not notice any European or German stores facing Robson Street. I find Robsonstrasse notable for being a common neighbourhood distinction to a historical footnote, as there has no formal literature documentation of this area. Today, you will find the name Robsonstrasse as a name on one of the hotels on Robson but curiously, there is no historic signage indicating its origins.

¹¹ "Robson Street in 1964, aka Robsonstrasse" <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=6EflBbYFzJ8>

Researching Robsonstrasse provided me with a lesson about critically assessing historical facts from a single childhood memory and a short video clip. However, the information from these two sources was insufficient for me to get a more complete picture of the community, so I took the opportunity to correspond with local historian Bruce Macdonald, about his recollections of the West End from around the same time period. Macdonald remembers Robson as a street that was “slightly European” and commented that most of the German characteristics would be unnoticed by most people. He pointed out that the reason the boy recollected these details was because his family happened to be German, went to the shops with German owners, and that explained why they all spoke German. “If you were German yourself, obviously you would pick up on whatever German-ness there was.” Furthermore in the post-second world war era, there were many Germans who felt self-conscious of their identity in Canada and some took efforts to minimize their foreign-ness in public, such as by trying to speak English without a German accent.¹² I realized I already created a story about Robsonstrasse in my mind from this one video clip because I wanted to believe that Robsonstrasse was the cultural center for Vancouver’s German community and did not hesitate to describe the street as a kind of cultural enclave. Working on this interpretation of a neighbourhood has helped me to gain a more objective approach to historical geography, as this is an instance where discrepancies existed between a certain childhood memory and an academic analysis.

It is recognized that prejudice against Germans have existed a generation before Robsonstrasse. Although Gustav Roedde was a pioneer settler in the early wave of European

¹² Personal phone call and follow up email correspondence with Bruce MacDonald, March 2015

immigration to Vancouver, their sons Bill and Walter faced prejudice when they served overseas with the Canadian forces in the First World War and Gustav himself was forced to hire a Canadian-born floor manager to take his place in the book binding business due to anti-German sentiment.¹³ For the same reason, Germans set up their own social clubs in Vancouver to escape prejudice, but over the years have considered to be well integrated into Vancouver's social, economic life.¹⁴

From Single Family Homes to Rooming Houses and Apartments

After a family tragedy when the Roedde's twenty-eight year old daughter was attacked and killed by a deranged patient while on nurse duty, they left their home in the West End in 1925 for a new home in Point Grey. It happened in the same time period when the neighbourhood was rapidly transitioning from a community of single family homes into boarding homes while some houses were replaced entirely by apartments.¹⁵ Even before then, the West End was shifting from a family oriented place of homes, the influx of returning soldiers from the First World War as well as new immigrants meant that housing space was already at a premium. By the 1920s, there were four times as many people living in the West End apartments as elsewhere in Vancouver.¹⁶ Rental based multiple dwelling units transformed the West End's

¹³ 21, Bingham, Janet. "More than a House: The Story of Roedde House and Barclay Heritage Square". Vancouver, B.C.: Roedde House Preservation Society, 1996. Print.

¹⁴ 220, Davis, Chuck. "The Greater Vancouver Book: An Urban Encyclopedia". Vancouver, B.C.: Evergreen, 1976. Print.

¹⁵ 22, Bingham, Janet. "More than a House: The Story of Roedde House and Barclay Heritage Square". Vancouver, B.C.: Roedde House Preservation Society, 1996. Print.

¹⁶ 18, 31, Bjornson, Michael. "A History of the West End comparing Changing Lifestyles with Changing Environment". Dissertation for Architecture, U of British Columbia, 1970.

reputation as a spacious family-oriented community to an area with mixed income and diverse demographics. In the times of the depression, it was not uncommon for residents to move multiple times within the West End during the post war and depression era, due to family financial difficulties. One lady was recorded moving eight times in the decades 1940s to 1960s¹⁷. With the onset of compartmentalized living, West End apartments housed many young adults who averaged only a year living there. The number of school aged children in the area decreased as families moved out and there were speculations that the West End would not be for children at all if development continues along the same trajectory.¹⁸ Mr. Pennington's candid recollections reflect the realities that existed in this changing time:

We lost the family home in the nice part of the West End when my father ran off with another woman. We shifted to a rooming house on Howe Street full of bootleggers, bookies, pimps, prostitutes and other derelicts and oddballs. One bathroom was to serve 11 'suites'. I only took a bath once there during my high school years. The rest of the time I snuck into the YMCA for showers.¹⁹

As families were moving out into rapidly expanding single-family suburbs, many new young single immigrants who were more accepting of a high-density urban lifestyle, moved in. Moreover, City Council encouraged urban growth in the West End by permitting higher densities on narrow residential double lots.²⁰

¹⁷ "Old West End Home Addresses & Phone Numbers" compiled by Gary Pennington

¹⁸ 31, Bjornson, Michael. Ibid

¹⁹ Personal conversation with Gary Pennington on general recollections of the West End, January 15, 2014

²⁰ 174, Berelowitz, Lance. Dream City: Vancouver and the Global Imagination. Vancouver, B.C.: Douglas & McIntyre, 2005. Print.

Prostitution and marginalized youth in the Davie Street neighbourhood

The provocative 1984 documentary “Hookers on Davie” opens with captions introducing the West End’s 20 block district with Davie Street at its centre as the “prostitution capital of Canada”, where “up to 150 prostitutes can be found working these streets at one time”. The on-screen text continues, “Many of them started as juveniles, around twelve years old...Because of the dangers of vulnerabilities they face on the street, the prostitutes in this area have created bonds by working together”.²¹ The next scene shows a group of women wearing revealing outfits standing on the sidewalk in broad daylight. The fact that visible street prostitution in this community was an ongoing social issue that has been going on for some time is supported by a 1977 Vancouver Police Report that details the increase in criminal code offences following the increasing numbers of street workers in the West End, where it documented 250 prostitutes.²² Due to the young ages where the sex workers started, this is very much a story concerning West End youth. Although they may not have all grown up in the area, they converged to this community to support their peers in order to make ends meet through the sex trade. Many subjects were interviewed in this documentary to share some personal memories. For instance, Michelle remembered walking home from Davie at age twelve one night. Suddenly a stranger prepositioned her with five dollars if she could help him load some boxes but instead he took her home where she was raped. Life was never quite the

²¹ Dale, Holly & Cole, Janis (Director). “Hookers on Davie”. Video documentary. Canada: Spectrum Films, 1984. Koerner Library audiovisual collection.

²² “Street Prostitution in Vancouver’s West End”. Vancouver Police Board report, September 7, 1977

same afterwards as she realized that this was one way where she could make money.²³ As many of the youths dropped out of high school due to difficult family circumstances and were faced with the prospects of homelessness, they resorted to last options. Bev, a 24 year old single mother with a seven year old son stated, "I was faced with the choice of making some money or sleeping on a bench".²⁴ The film "Hookers on Davie" sheds light on some of the marginalized young adults who made the West End their home through these difficult years. Their stories are not shared on the Vancouver Public Library's online exhibit on "West End Stories" but they speak of the real hardships that existed not quite so long ago.

Further Research

It is my intention in this project to gain a balanced look on the lives of children and youth in the West End from a variety of time periods and perspectives. The archival materials, oral history tapes and fonds aided greatly in forming a profile of the lives of Kenneth Caple and the Roedde family to paint a picture of the idyllic family life in the West End before other parts of Vancouver were developed. However, further research on the lives of youth in West End youth could help shed light on the official 1969 West End profile, which did not contain direct quotes from the children themselves. What did they say about life in the West End while living in the "concrete jungle"? Were they happy with their circumstances of living there? I took efforts to learn more about the marginalized population by viewing the interviews of the young street prostitutes. In addition, similar research could be done on other minority and ethnic groups living in the West End. What was life like for immigrant families and where did they live? A critic

²³ Ibid

²⁴ Ibid

made the point that “Hookers on Davie” failed to depict reality in Vancouver due to the fact that it did not interview Aboriginal women, despite that fact that they are overrepresented in street prostitution.²⁵ The use of online media in addition to traditional sources found in libraries and archives has been an asset for me in this particular project, as unofficial names such as “Robsonstrasse” showed up more in local parlance rather than civic documents.

Giving the West End back to children

As a human geographer, I can make the conclusion that there are “multiple experiences of West End youths” as it a large neighbourhood comprised of smaller recognized communities such as Davie Village. Indeed, Kenneth Caple’s experience of growing up in his Beach avenue family home in the 1900s next to the forest was drastically different from Michelle’s in the 1970s, where a chance encounter on the street led to a high-risk lifestyle with uncertain income. However, more generally the West End has always attracted residents as a place of convenient urban living, with ready accessibility to nature as well as to employment opportunities and activities associated with Downtown Vancouver. Contrary to suggestions that the West End may no longer be a place for children at all in the near future due to its lack of community and play spaces²⁶, the neighbourhood has made large strides in preserving its early neighbourhood charms and spaces, therefore early concerns about the West End as no longer being a place welcoming to children is unrealized.

²⁵ Monaghan, Emily. “Hookers on Davie: an old documentary within a new context”. Film review on Rabble.ca. 2014. <http://rabble.ca/blogs/bloggers/feminist-current/2014/07/hookers-on-davie-old-documentary-within-new-context>

²⁶ 31, Bjornson, Michael. “A History of the West End comparing Changing Lifestyles with Changing Environment”. Dissertation for Architecture, U of British Columbia, 1970. UBC Special Collections

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