



Revitalizing Japantown?: a unifying exploration of Human Rights, branding and place in
Vancouver's Downtown Eastside

2012-2015

Community Advisory Committee and Partners Update – October 2013

“Revitalizing Japantown?” is a research project that engages Downtown Eastside (DTES) residents, organizations and artists with the goal of recovering the long Human Rights history of the neighbourhood while doing our part to ensure that the rights of current DTES residents remain a public priority. To accomplish this we're working to build relationships with the five founding communities of the DTES: Coast Salish people, the Low-Income community, Chinese Canadians, Japanese Canadians and African Canadians.

www.revitalizingjapantown.ca

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Dear Community Advisory Committee (CAC) members & Community Partners,

It has been a very active spring and summer for the research team and our partners in the DTES. Since our last update in April, Project Researchers have: interviewed 25 current and former residents of the DTES and the Japanese-Canadian community; had a strong presence at the 2013 Powell Street Festival; presented a public talk on the history of the Powell Street area; observed the LAPP (Local Area Planning Process) with great interest; and participated in important discussions surrounding the City of Vancouver's recent Apology to Japanese Canadians. The Project's graduate students have begun their community based research. In this update, we'd like to share some highlights of our recent work in advance of our upcoming Community Advisory Meeting on November 4th.

Research

Interviews

Aaron Franks, Jeff Masuda, Audrey Kobayashi and Joyce Rock have interviewed 25 current and former DTES residents and the Japanese-Canadian community since June, a process made possible by participants' generosity with their time and the assistance of the Potluck Café, PACE, Gallery Gachet, the Vancouver Japanese Language School and Japanese Hall, VANDU and Mission Possible, among others. The interviews have almost all been transcribed and will be returned to interviewees for their approval in October, with more interviews scheduled for November. Among the themes to date, we are seeing a universally deep concern with housing along with an understanding of Human Rights as the Right to safe space with the same dignity that people with secure housing in other neighbourhoods take for granted. For many people, personal and public space in the DTES are completely intertwined. Clearly, there is also a complex relationship between current DTES mobilization and the activism of the Japanese-Canadian community, past and present.

Archives

Many of the people we interviewed have agreed to have their audio interview uploaded to the online archive of the National Nikkei Museum (NNM). This is a fantastic oral history resource for the DTES and the NNM. Nonetheless, because research ethics require that interviewees have the ability to revoke their consent after the interview, the idea of posting something online remains a challenge – how do you erase something posted on the Internet? As a compromise, the Museum's archivists have agreed not to post the recordings online for 5 years, giving participants a long window of time to change their minds.

Students

Our three graduate student researchers are exploring existing archives as well as creating our own. Trevor Wideman has been examining the City of Vancouver's (COV) extensive archives which project and shape the DTES through past place naming, mapping and planning practices, a process which continues today in the

guise of the controversial Local Area Planning Process (LAPP). Scott McCulloch has begun using the COV and NNM archives to specifically assess urban branding and cultural festivals in the area, and how the histories and geographies of Human Rights struggles inform current processes of rebranding the DTES. In contrast, Jenna Drabble works with the DTES Neighbourhood House in creating a ‘right to the city’ based on sustainable and just food systems and has been interviewing key proponents of the “Right to Food” philosophy in the Downtown Eastside to gain their perspectives on the successes and challenges of this important initiative.

2013 Powell Street Festival and other DTES events

Revitalizing Japantown? Team members again participated in August’s Powell Street Festival in Oppenheimer Park. We were very visible and there was a lot of productive discussion with interested residents.

“Many people asked pointed questions about the goals of the research, and there was a lot of support for the project in general ... It was valuable to hear what they had to say about their rights as residents of neighbourhood, as well as to have conversations about what it is like to live in the community, especially for a newcomer such as myself.” (Trevor Wideman)

Greg Masuda’s remarkable Project poster drew a lot of attention as did our button-making activity, wherein people could personalize their own buttons that expressed their own thoughts on Human Rights in the DTES – beautifully lettered in traditional Japanese *kanji* script by Keiko Boxall.



During the Festival, Project researcher Audrey Kobayashi gave a well-attended public presentation at the Japanese Language School entitled “Memories of Our Present” on the political power of memory, place and the continuing legacy of Japanese Canadians in the DTES as well as the post-internment Diaspora. We were able to link this talk with one of the Festival’s historical walking tours for which Audrey wrote the guide several years ago. History too is made every day, in many intimate ways... project students also participated in a walking tour and saw several uncomfortable interactions between DTES residents and tour groups which highlighted how different perceptions of the DTES play out in the reality of the street.

Greg Masuda and others continue to closely observe the LAPP – we have a keen interest in its outcomes and more importantly, how DTES residents and (DTES LAPP participants) evaluate the process from the perspective of the identity and use of the neighbourhood. Greg continues to film material for his documentary project REPOSSESSION, as it is an integral part of the Project’s arts-based research.

On 25 September, the City of Vancouver formally apologized for its Wartime motions that ultimately enabled the eviction of Vancouver residents of Japanese Canadian ancestry. This apology was the result of the leadership of the Greater Vancouver Japanese Canadian Citizen’s Association Human Rights Committee,

a project partner. The contentious issues surrounding the City's role in this historical injustice was particularly salient to many of the present-day human rights advocates working in the DTES, which led to very productive and momentum-building discussions about ways in which our research can contribute to more organized and sustainable efforts among Japanese Canadian activists, many of whom presently serve on the Powell Street Festival Society's Advocacy Committee (another project partner) to honour the legacy of redress in ways that empower this community to assert its right to the neighbourhood.


Future Plans

The Project Team will be conducting more interviews with DTES residents, with particular interest in speaking with those who have been squeezed out of the neighbourhood by housing pressures. Team member Sonia Bookman will be conducting a specific line of research into how the neighbourhood is currently branded/identified, and the relationship between such branding and neighbourhood economic and social change.

In the early evening of Monday November 4th we will be holding our 2nd annual Community Advisory Committee gathering, in the company of the Project's 6 partners. Its exact DTES location and starting time is yet to be confirmed, but it will include a supper catered by Potluck Café and we ask you to save the date. We'll provide you with more details about our work to date that evening and reveal ideas for a participatory arts-based public event we'll be hosting in Spring 2014. We're interested in your comments, ideas and vision of how Human Rights in the DTES might best be put into public practice at this time of rapid development and potential displacement.

We look forward to seeing you on Monday November 4th and thank you for your continuing support and interest. Please don't hesitate to get in touch at any time – we're always happy to discuss the Project with you.

Yours,



Aaron

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