

City better now than in the good old days

An exhibition of street photographs shows a Vancouver that has improved in just decades

Trevor Boddy



At the Jan. 11 opening of the new exhibition *Unfinished Business: Vancouver Street Photographs, 1955 to 1985* I witnessed something I had never seen before: Acute urban nostalgia from people in their 30s.

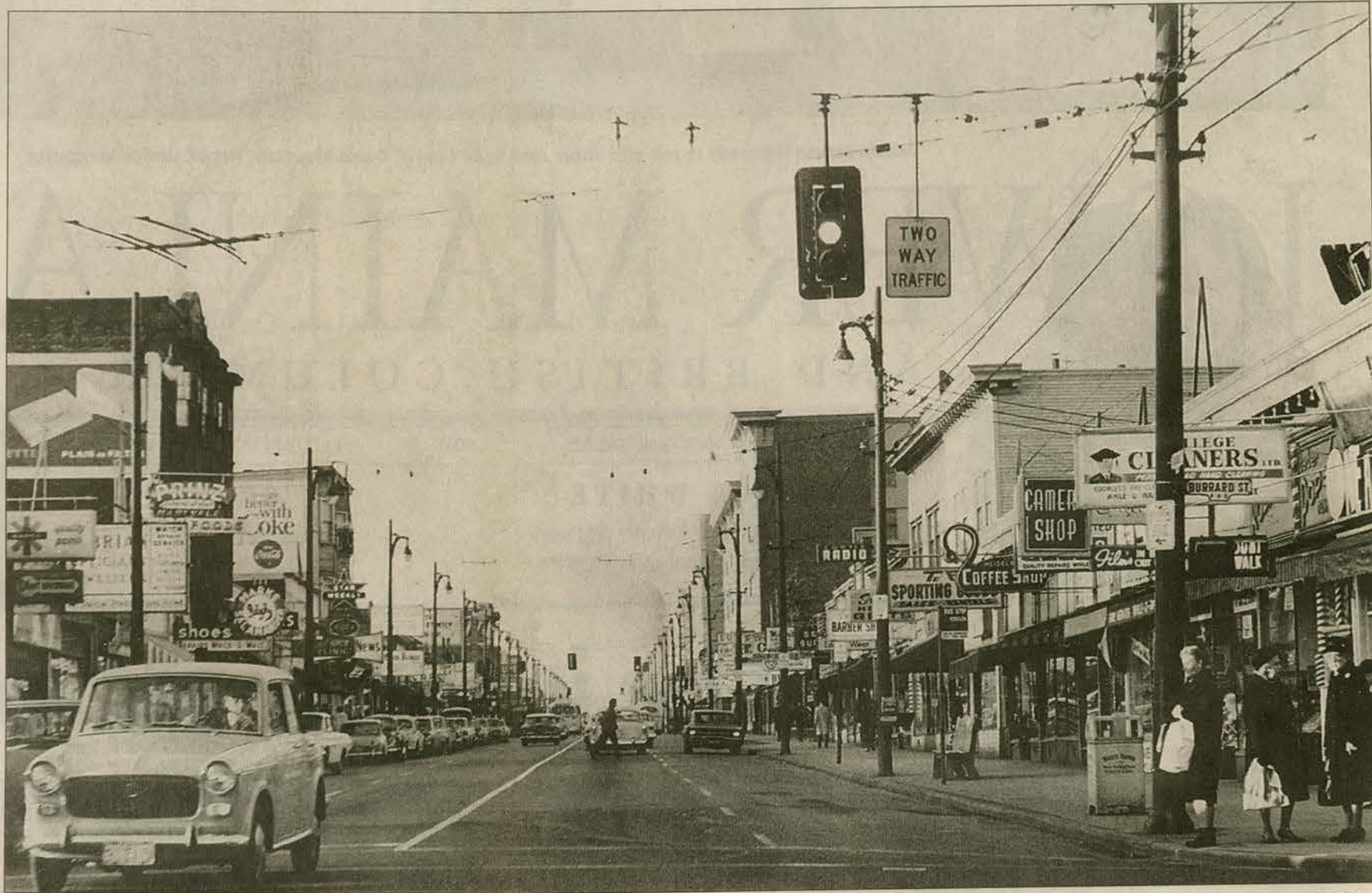
We expect old-timers to jaw on and on when shown images of the city that once was, but I had never seen this behaviour in people so young, part of a crowd of several hundred who mobbed the launch of this important and entertaining exhibition.

Late 1970s images of the old Cambie Street Bridge or the really big olive jar that used to loom over Grandview Highway brought squeals of recognition, that special kind of nostalgia prompted when the remembrances of childhood are proven to be accurate, not fantasy. It is testament to the rapidity of urban change in this city that so much of this exhibition at North Vancouver's Presentation House Gallery through March 2 documents a city that is no longer there, even though the dates on the photographs themselves are surprisingly recent.

Pictures from the early 1970s by Sverre Erik Eriksen record what have since become the no-go blocks of a drugtrade-infested East Hastings Street.

Back then, this was a place where middle-class women could pick up a bracelet at Miller's Jewellery, sneak into the *Gone With the Wig* shop next door, then most unbelievably — by the standards of this street now almost abandoned by legal businesses — finish up by paying their bills at the Toronto-Dominion Bank at the corner of Main and Hastings.

New arrivals often possess sensitivity to the subtleties of a city in transforma-



JACK DALE

Looking west on Robson from Burrard in the late 1960s: An image that reminds us that "Robsonstrasse" was largely a retroactive fiction.

tion that locals cannot see. For example, Vietnam-era American immigrant photographers Tony Westman and Henri Robideau show Beach Avenue transforming from rooming houses to high-rise towers over a few months in 1973, and record the late-lamented, oversized Pineridge Farms rooftop bread-loaf erected by the McGavins. The latter is one of many local examples of gargantuanism eliminated by the doctrinaire good taste of city planners a few years later.

Soon after seeing the hundreds of views of Vancouver from the mid-1950s to just before Expo 86 in this powerful show, another, more surprising revelation welled up in this viewer: Vancouver is so much more interesting a place now than then.

The city represented in these pho-

tographs comes across as a variation on Campbell River, Kamloops without the pretensions.

Pierce through the happy fog of nostalgia — what French critic Roland Barthes calls the "reverie" induced by period urban photography — and it becomes clear that Vancouver is so much better a place to live now than it was even 30 years ago. I found evolution where I expected Devo, to make a late 1970s pop cultural reference consistent with the era of much of the imagery in the show.

Here are a few examples among countless others of how Vancouver is richer and more engaging now than before.

Photographer and restaurateur Christos Dikeakos has a 1969 view of the foot of Oak Street on the False Creek side.

There once was an enormous parking lot here to store thousands of Toyotas and Datsuns on their way to the auto dealers of Canada.

Check out the same spot today.

It is an infinitely better locale, with a lush park, generous playing fields and medium-density housing for a wide variety of income groups. The biggest complaint I have today about False Creek itself is that it is polluted with too many marinas. The show has ample images of oil slicks and wood chips floating on the surface of what once was the industrial toilet bowl of Vancouver.

The same pattern is evident on individual Vancouver streets. I had forgotten — until reminded by an image in the show — that ugly wooden hydro poles once ran down the sidewalks of Pender Street in the heart of Chinatown. Now we can actually see the fine Shanghai-derived commercial buildings lining this street, even if their owners and residents have long since fled to Richmond.

I miss the bakers and fishmongers of the Robson Street of old, but a late-1960s Jack Dale image of the block just west of Burrard reminds us that supposedly European "Robsonstrasse" was largely a retroactive fiction concocted as the street transformed utterly.

In fact, the Manhattan Apartments is the only portion of his photograph still visible today. Yes, the Prinz Food Store is there to see, but it is overwhelmed by generic sporting goods, camera, radio and barber shops. If you are nostalgic for this kind of collection, I suggest you try South Fraser Street, or the aforementioned Kamloops.

However, should your tastes — like mine — run to Osaka-style sushi bars and cheap Korean *bee-bim-bap*, Robson is a better eating street now than it ever was then.

Another quality of Vancouver life then that our nostalgia has edited out is visual clutter. It seems that every surface of buildings in that by-gone era were encrusted with signs, most of them hand-lettered and of varying degrees of wonkiness. Billboards were a fixture of every street and every bridge, seemingly more numerous then, before Jimmy Pattison bought up every outdoor advertising company going, and hired Glen Clark to sell them.

As seen in a 1974 Greg Girard photograph, the long-gone Kit Kat Klub on the Downtown Eastside had a sign that read: "If you want nudity, buy a girlie magazine: this is strictly a dance club." It must be nearly 1974 since I last heard the phrase "girlie magazine," or for that matter, the word "girlie," thanks to the rise of non-diminutive feminism. Next door to the Kit Kat Klub was a barber shop, its sign offering "Men's Variety" items along with "Oil Shines." Don't ask.

Many of the 18 photographers collected in the show moonlighted as photographers for Pacific Press, worked as cinematographers, or had quiet other lives as school teachers. As a group, however, they were drawn time and again to the kinder, gentler Downtown Eastside of their times. There is a simple reason for this, one that shows how much Vancouver has changed, and for the better: This used to be the only part of the city with any street life.

Photographers wanting more than shop fronts and parked cars in their viewfinders had no choice back then, other than opening their apertures along Hastings, Cordova, Carrall or Abbott.

How different today. The rich flow of humanity in all its appalling variety can now be found any day along Denman, Davie, even Broadway or upper Main Street. The sidewalks in this exhibition look sterile and apocalyptic because we did not live on them back then, and certainly never sat drinking coffee or beer on the pavements. The biggest recent animating force for our winter-time streets is not the creation of some visionary architect or urbanist, but municipal and provincial anti-smoking bylaws.

These health rules plus our much higher living densities have pushed people and activity out of buildings and on to the sidewalks of Vancouver, and our city is much more interesting because of it.

Having said this, there is a hackneyed urban analysis that percolates through the work of most of the photographers collected in *Unfinished Business: Vancouver Street Photographs 1955 to 1985*.

With their cameras pointed constantly at docile "rubbies" and eccentric street people, these works are subject to the same accusations of slumming received by Lincoln Clarkes' recent portraits of Vancouver streetwalkers in his book *Heroines*.

Their incessant use of long lenses to visually compress signs and street infrastructure into urban collages was a recurring visual cliché of those times. It comes across as cheap kind of hippie critique: "Hey, this is the city, man," posed against its supposed opposite, the commune in the mountains.

Only those photographers who would go on to significant art careers were able to resist these much-milked visual shibboleths; they got to be artists — and not just urban documentarians — because they thought creatively. Jeff Wall is established as the brilliant original he is with an important very early work in the show entitled *Landscape Manual*, the only images in the entire exhibition of such then-a-building Vancouver suburbs as Richmond or Coquitlam. He saw the visual potential of these municipalities, while others did not, hiding behind the literally commonplace.

The photos of the urban visual archeologists who are Iain and Ingrid Baxter of the N. E. Thing Company whimsically find graphic evidence of arrow-shapes secretly lodged all over the Lower Mainland, while Christos Dikeakos frames our Kits Point planetarium so that it looks very much like a flying saucer crashing to earth (the building's architects claimed its shape was inspired by a Haida hat.) The unexpected revelation of the exhibition is the meticulous and beautifully-composed urban views of Fred Herzog, who by day was a medical photographer at VGH.

What the show sometimes lacks in artistic originality, it more than makes up as a visual record. Whether you are a long-time resident or new Vancouverite, this exhibition is essential viewing for understanding our changing city.