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## Rehab on a shoestring for Vancouver's neglected hotels

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*The province is upgrading 24 single-room hotels for mixed use as social housing and retail space*

In Vancouver's Downtown Eastside, on Carrall Street, between Cordova and Hastings, the only draw used to be a dingy live music bar that stank of stale beer. Nowadays, the mood has shifted considerably. Bicycles fly by, and where the dingy bar once stood, hipsters sit window-side in a trendy café, eating freshly-made ciabatta bread sandwiches and drinking lattes. The place is hopping.

The room is bright and airy, with sky-high coffered plaster ceilings, exposed brick walls, and old-fashioned wood windows almost as big as garage doors. The stained vinyl floor has been torn up and the original ceramic tiles exposed in all their ruined glory, with cement patches filling in any parts that had been damaged. The restaurant, Nelson the Seagull, is one of the first commercial tenants to move into the Rainier Hotel, which is one of 24 single-room occupancy hotels (SROs) in Vancouver purchased by the province and upgraded for mixed use as social housing and retail space. The province started purchasing the SROs in 2007, and the Rainier Hotel is one of the last to be completed.

"It's quite a success story, the province buying these SROs that were run by slumlords," says architect Barry McGinn, while giving a tour of the site. "It achieved a successful heritage restoration and social housing renovation - two concepts that haven't always co-existed well."

With the instant popularity of its first commercial tenant, the Rainier Hotel is an especially successful example of a rehabilitated mixed-use property in a transition neighbourhood. The large building has four commercial spaces on the main floor and social housing units for women on the upper floor.

Heritage architect and consultant Mr. McGinn was brought in to oversee the transition at the hotel, which, in the old days, once housed fishermen, loggers and cannery workers. It is one of the few remaining examples of mixed-use space in Vancouver built between the 1890s and 1920s. For his efforts, the city recently awarded the building a heritage conservation award, one of three heritage awards that the SRO hotels project has so far received.

Mr. McGinn has been a heritage architect and consultant for 18 years, and began work on the SRO project three and a half years ago. He was brought in as a consultant to work with BC Housing, a partner on the project, renovating 1,400 rooms with a budget of about \$65-million. Knowing that heritage projects are risky because they easily go way over budget, Mr. McGinn took a no-nonsense approach. He helped decipher which SROs were worth a complete overhaul, and which were too dilapidated to be worth a major effort.

"We decided which ones are high heritage value, the ones that are buggered up but still retrievable, and the ones that have been trashed and should just hold steady," he said.

While all buildings were brought up to current fire and safety codes, only nine were extensively rehabilitated, says Mr. McGinn. He emphasizes that "restoration" and "rehabilitation" have different meanings in his business. While a restoration is true to the original integrity of the building, rehabilitation is the less intense but respectful version of a heritage makeover.

The Rainier is notable because it was rehabilitated with a relatively tight budget of \$1.5-million. Budgets for the other buildings averaged around \$3-million, says Mr. McGinn. The budget for the Rainier project, however, was kept low because Mr. McGinn and a B.C. Housing project manager acted as the project managers, instead of bringing in a third party construction manager who'd add to the cost.

"I convinced them that we should just do this one differently," says Mr. McGinn. He also saved money by taking an economical approach - properly restoring aspects of the building that mattered and simply rehabilitating features that didn't matter as much. For example, the expansive windows inside Nelson the Seagull that face the street are properly restored wood windows. The ones at the rear of the room, behind the kitchen, are made of vinyl. To the average person's eye, the difference would go undetected.

The plaster coffered ceiling discovered under the old drop ceiling was simply patched up. Mr. McGinn also convinced B.C. Housing that instead of replacing missing or damaged tiles on the floor, holes should simply be patched, creating a Greek ruins look. They may have been money-saving measures, but the overall effect is an old-world era feel that would have been lost if the room had been gutted and completely rebuilt.

"The idea was, we would repair the best we can within the budget, but we will leave it a bit raw," he says. "It wasn't the highest quality restoration money could buy. It was just enough repair so that it was acceptable."

"All these SRO projects came with their budget constraints and challenges. So in some places we just got really good value for our money."

Like a lot of the old SROs in the Downtown Eastside, the turn-of-the-century building had suffered from neglect. Its exterior had been painted eight times, which trapped moisture and dissolved the binder in the brick mortar. The paint had to be stripped off and the mortar entirely repointed. Much of the façade was sagging and needed to be rebuilt. The storefronts that once sold produce and flowers had to be recreated, complete with alcoves with reproduction lighting and porcelain tiling true to the old Greek pattern popular at the time. The city kicked in \$165,000 in grant money to help cover the neon signage and façade cost, says Mr. McGinn.

The building follows the view that in order to clean up a downtrodden street, you need to bring in a mix of residential, commercial and retail space. It's a recipe that started with the Woodward's Building, which has become the model for mixed use in the downtown eastside.

The Portland Hotel Society now runs the women's housing portion of the hotel and has plans for a coffee shop, which is so far still empty. Next door to Nelson the Seagull is a bridal boutique, which would have been an unthinkable proposition a year ago. Across the street, a local developer is rumoured to be starting a condo project soon.

Only the large corner storefront at the Rainier remains unleased, but there has been interest from high-end restaurants. So far, finding tenants has not been an issue.

"People have walked in and said, 'Oh, this is kind of neat.' We haven't had to work too hard," says Mr. McGinn.