

# SEIZING THE MOMENT: ESTABLISHING THE EASTSIDE ARTS DISTRICT

/ John Steil RPP, FCIP, Matthew Campbell,  
and Esther Rausenberg

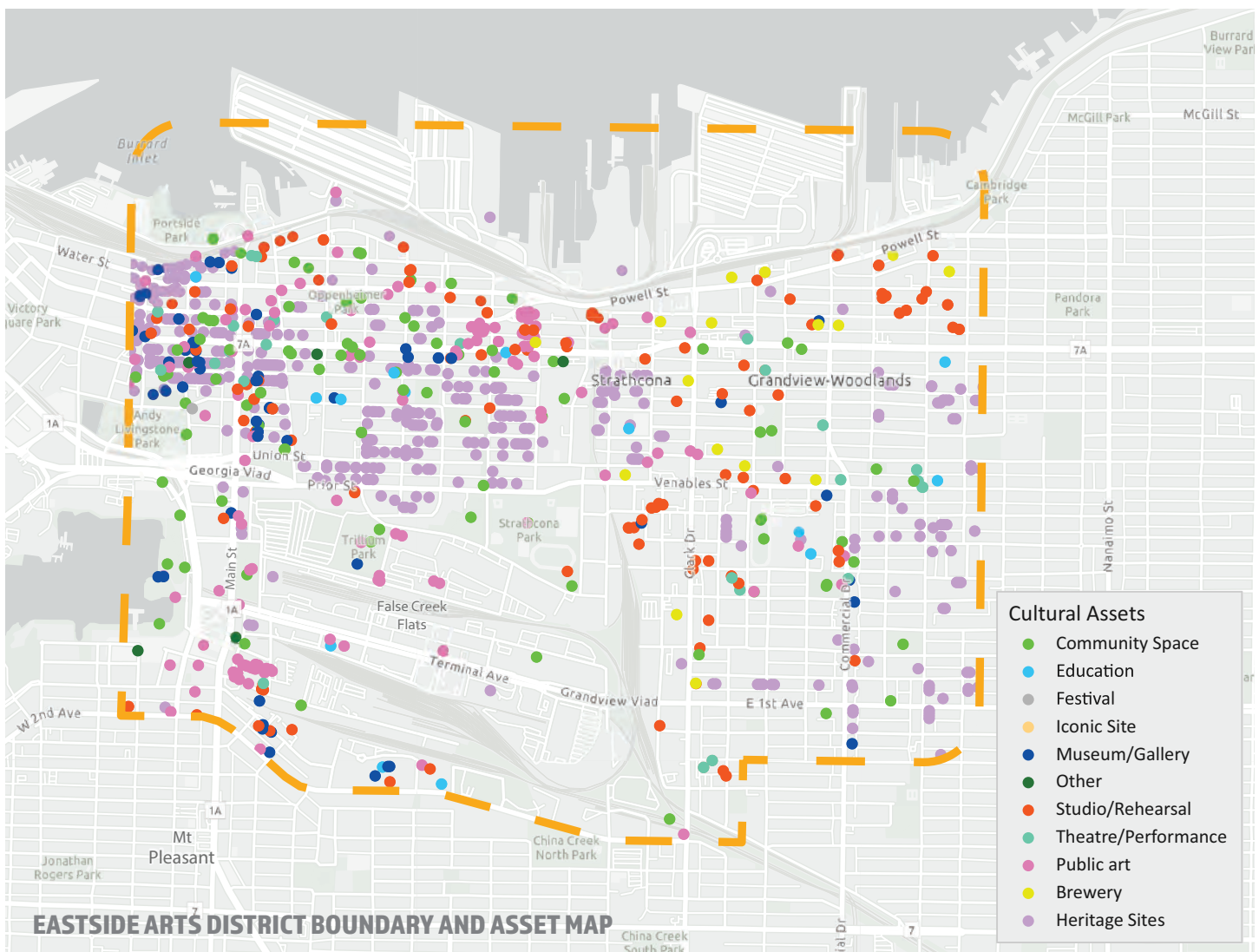


The Eastside Arts Society (EAS) is well-known in Vancouver for producing the Eastside Culture Crawl, an annual visual arts, design, and crafts festival for over 25 years. In 2019, the EAS published *A City Without Art? No Net Loss, Plus!* This report, which won awards from PIBC in 2020 and from CIP in 2021, quantified the significant net loss of 400,000 ft<sup>2</sup> of artist studio space on the Eastside in the preceding 10 years. The report argued that to prevent further displacement of artists and loss of production space, all levels of government should more proactively implement existing and new policies, regulations, and incentives to protect, enhance and expand artist studio spaces.

The story of displacement, unaffordability, and erasure is a story shared by all artistic disciplines and cultural producers. A key recommendation in *A City Without Art?* was to formally establish an Eastside Arts District to protect and enhance all Eastside arts and culture.



Left: Eastside Atelier houses 49 art studios, slated for demolition Above: Now vacant Glass Onion Studio, slated for demolition



**EASTSIDE ARTS DISTRICT BOUNDARY AND ASSET MAP**

An arts district is commonly understood as a well-recognized, spatially defined, mixed-use area with a high concentration of varied arts and cultural spaces that interact with other sectors. Across North America and Europe, arts districts have encouraged the clustering of cultural industries and enhanced cultural, community and economic development. Arts districts have two key components that must work in tandem: (1) top-down, planned elements such as formal recognition, municipal policy, stable funding, and governance, and; (2) bottom-up, emergent, self-organized activities driven by the arts and culture community.

Vancouver's Eastside is a distinct arts and cultural ecology, containing many of the characteristics that make a successful arts district. These include an identifiable demarcated area; a high concentration of artists, musicians, performers, and cultural

producers; diverse tangible and intangible cultural assets; production, performance, rehearsal, presentation, and festival spaces; major art schools and other anchor institutions; and complementary economic drivers such as craft breweries and restaurants.

The Eastside Arts Society is advocating for an Eastside Arts District that will be a *thriving, sustainable cultural ecology where the practice of arts and culture drives creativity, identity, celebration, and community*. A formally established District would not only help to preserve and develop space but would also strengthen the capacity for artists and arts organizations to thrive.

There is an urgency to this project. Historically, much of the Eastside was a lower-rent and primarily industrially zone, highly valued as an informal arts district. But this is changing rapidly. Pressure to redevelop, escalating property values, and economic hardship created by the

pandemic have exacerbated the financial burden on artists and cultural producers. As well, the imminent relocation of the St. Paul's Hospital from the West End to the Eastside, with heightened interest in adjacent lands, will increase competition for real estate in the Eastside arts-rich area.

### The Process

In March 2020, Vancouver City Council passed a motion supporting exploration of a formal Eastside Arts District. The Eastside Arts Society received financial support from the City to begin research. Later, additional funding from the Vancouver Foundation and the BC Arts Council enabled significant recalibration of the original project toward a more comprehensive, community-led Eastside Arts District strategy.

Other innovative arts and cultural district offer precedents to learn about





New I2-zoned development in heart of artist zone.

funding, zoning, policy, property tax, and marketing approaches. These exist in Baltimore, London (UK), Toronto, San Francisco, Jersey City and elsewhere. These models will inspire an approach customized for Vancouver's Eastside.

As part of the research, the EAS engaged community stakeholders and heard consistently that access to affordable and secure production space should be a top priority. There was also enthusiasm for the creation of a new entity that will coordinate a vibrant arts district.

In researching local policy, the EAS found the project aligns with multi-level government objectives to protect a wide range of arts and cultural assets. These range from Vancouver's *Making Space for Arts and Culture* and the *Employment Lands and Economy Review* that signal the urgency for providing and protecting arts and culture. Likewise, the Federal government's *A Vision for Cultural Hubs and Districts in Canada* is strongly aligned with the objectives of the EAD. What is needed is a commitment to action.

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## Seizing the Moment

The EAS recently published its latest report, *Seizing the Moment: Establishing the Eastside Arts District*. The report emphasizes the need for urgent decisions and actions given the continuing loss of art and cultural spaces on the Eastside. Recommendations of the report include strategies that the EAS can use to help build capacity for Eastside arts and culture:

- creating an arts initiative fund to sustain the District's operations and programming
- reducing the negative impacts of triple-net-leases where tenants are responsible for property expenses, including property tax
- ensuring that there are effective tools for implementing arts and culture policy
- land use incentives for preserving, replacing, or expanding arts and cultural spaces
- engaging arts stakeholders earlier in the redevelopment and rezoning process
- supporting community ownership

- leveraging publicly owned assets

The EAS is continuing to explore formally establishing the Eastside Arts District.

Next steps include:

- expanded community engagement, including with Indigenous communities
- confirming District boundaries
- establishing secure funding to promote creative businesses, non-profit organizations, public art, arts production spaces
- continuing collaboration with all levels of government
- developing a governance and financial structure
- designing a roadmap for policy implementation
- producing an online arts and cultural asset mapping tool for the area

Long-term goals include:

- acquiring space for a community-owned Eastside Arts District office and inclusive arts hub
- producing additional public events and programming
- developing new production, rehearsal, presentation, and performance spaces for artists, cultural producers, and audiences.

When *A City Without Art? No Net Loss, Plus!* was presented a Gold Award, PIBC's jury stated it was "an outstanding and highly innovative joint effort between a not-for-profit and the artistic community." CIP's jury made similar comments. Since that time, competition over the land base in the Eastside has dramatically escalated. Now is the time to make the Eastside Arts District a reality. ■

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Street sign at UBC, Vancouver.

# BUILDING GOOD RELATIONS – UPDATING THE HERITAGE CONSERVATION ACT

/ John Somogyi-Csizmazia and Maria Stanborough RPP, MCIP

In March 2022 the BC Provincial Government released its *Declaration of the Rights of Indigenous Peoples Act (DRIPA)* - Action Plan. While DRIPA was adopted in 2019, the Action Plan took a few years to coordinate, no doubt interrupted by the pandemic.

In Section 4 of the DRIPA Action Plan, the Province has set an important action for heritage:

4.35 Work with First Nations to reform the *Heritage Conservation Act* to align with the UN Declaration, including shared decision-making and the protection of First Nations cultural, spiritual, and heritage sites and objects. (Ministry of Forests, Ministry of Tourism, Arts, Culture and Sport)

The Province made a commitment to reforming the *Heritage Conservation Act*, and is in the process of engaging with First Nations across BC.

This action has been a long time in the making. Indigenous and non-Indigenous leaders have been calling for change almost since