



This page and opposite: The former Hudson's Bay Company building in Victoria is being transformed into The Hudson condos, with much of the original heritage structure preserved.



By D. Grant Black

What's in Store

As Western Canadians give up the suburbs to move back downtown, heritage department stores may offer the perfect housing solution.

For the last seven years,

former Saskatoonian Derek Hrychuk, 45, and his Peruvian-born wife, Patricia Loayza-Guerra, 43, have worked at United Nations postings from East Timor to the Democratic Republic of Congo to Haiti. Now they're ready for a new adventure back home in Saskatoon.

During a recent visit to the city from their posting in Haiti, the couple bought a 1,300-square-foot condo in the yet-to-be-finished 2nd Avenue Lofts. The fact that these lofts occupy a space that once teemed with holiday shoppers only adds to their charm.

"Growing up in Saskatoon, I knew the Hudson's Bay store," says Hrychuk. "I used to go shopping there with my mom and I'd ride the escalators. I loved that building with all the mosaic tile."

Hrychuk and Loayza-Guerra are part of an international trend that has seen a mass return of residents to downtowns, to where a turnkey home can be lock-and-go without homeowners worrying about the length of their grass. And more significantly in Western Canada, many of these lofts are former stalwarts of the retail community: former Hudson's Bay Company stores—so integral to this country's beginnings—are being transformed into modern living spaces.

HBC has sold off two spacious city-centre stores in Western Canada in the last three years (Victoria is the other location), perhaps a testament to 21st-century retail churn. Yet, in a time of raised environmental awareness, these recycled, retrofitted department stores provide a well-suited downtown home for urban professionals who won't settle for the suburbs.

Saskatoon's converted Bay was built in 1958 with three floors, and for generations was the city's main shopping destination. This modernist marvel's most striking element is its exterior, which features Manitoba Tyndall stone cladding inlaid with coloured mosaic tile. After the Bay moved two blocks away to the smaller, vacant Eaton's store in 2000, the once-proud original Bay store sat neglected for four years before two local developers set their sights on it.

"This is a major conversion and change-of-use [project]," explains Edmonton architect Gene Dub, best known in Edmonton for designing the new city hall. "2nd Avenue Lofts is virtually a new building in an old skin." Dub has converted 20 other older structures for clients and his own real estate ventures, and he holds a 60-percent stake in 2nd Avenue Lofts. His architectural plan involved gutting the former store, installing two-storey windows and replacing the escalator shaft with an atrium that now floods the building's interior with natural light. He also added a fifth, two-storey floor with 30 balcony-equipped units. Retail and parking will fill the ground floor.

Dub is always on the lookout for older buildings in Prairie city centres. "I have an interest in reinvigorating the downtown areas. The thing with downtown housing is that after hours it keeps people downtown," he explains. "In Prairie cities, they usually die after five o'clock when everybody heads for the suburbs."



The Bay in Saskatoon has been modernized to make it condo-appropriate, opening up the shell to more windows. The '50s modernist design suits the clean, contemporary interiors.



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In fact, “Be Bold or Move to Suburbia”

was the tagline behind a similar reconstruction effort in Vancouver. When Woodward’s Vancouver flagship store closed in 1993 after almost 100 years in business, politicians and community leaders agreed to create affordable housing for residents of Canada’s poorest postal code, the infamous Downtown Eastside. It took until September 2006 for the wrecking ball to swing. That’s when three-quarters of the 600,000-square-foot building was demolished, everything but the original 1903 structure at the corner of Abbott and Hastings streets. The site is currently under construction and three condo towers (nine, 31, 41 storeys) designed by Westbank and Peterson Architects will rise beside Woodward’s six-storey original. All 536 units of market housing have already been sold.

When the Woodward’s District is completed in early 2009, it will also feature Simon Fraser University’s School for the Contemporary Arts, a drug store, government offices and shared community space. The promised 200 units of social housing will be situated in the 31-storey tower. After a seismic upgrade that includes a new steel frame, the 600,000-square-foot original building will also provide daycare on the top floor and office space for non-profit organizations on lower floors. Retail will anchor the ground floor.

To Woodward’s marketer Bob Rennie—whose “Be Bold” tagline contributed to the Woodward’s condos selling out in a day—Vancouver’s unique downtown neighbourhood requires balance. “This was a very conscious decision to come into an emerging area and to understand that the future of sustainability really is the fortunate living with the less-fortunate.”

The evolution of Victoria’s downtown

Bay store parallels that of Saskatoon’s: it also relocated to a nearby former Eaton’s store. Located on Douglas Street, the original, iconic Georgian-style structure, built in 1913, stood empty until it was purchased in 2004 by B.C.’s Townline Group of Companies. Encompassing 200,000 square feet, the statuesque four-storey structure fills a full city block. But when it morphs into Victoria’s newest address as “The Hudson” in summer 2009, two and a half new floors will be added to accommodate penthouse suites for a total of 152 loft condos built onto six floors. The existing parkade will be demolished and two residential towers will replace it with an additional 300 to 400 units.

Townline has already decommissioned the former Bay building and stripped it down to its raw shell. The existing windows are part of the heritage restoration and they’ll be refurbished to modern code requirements. But department store conversions—for all their recent popularity—aren’t as simple as they may appear. “We do a fair amount of heritage restoration in and around Vancouver and believe me, there are easier ways to make a living,” explains Townline’s president Rick Ilich. “It’s very complicated and there’s a lot of mystery [figuring out] the construction. It’s an emotional process where you have a very strong movement to preserve a city’s heritage. A lot of guys in the development community just don’t want to take that on.” **wl**

Top to bottom: Vancouver’s Woodward’s in its heyday back in 1935; developers dared new owners to “be bold”; the famous Woodward’s W will remain in the new structure.