



# Revitalizing Japantown? Exhibit

## The continuous fabric of change, resistance, and the Right to Remain in Vancouver's Downtown Eastside (DTES)

**Sherri Kajiwara**

*Revitalizing Japantown?* at the Nikkei National Museum (October 24, 2015 – January 31, 2016) immersed visitors in complex, controversial, and compelling issues that have shaped Vancouver's Downtown Eastside (DTES) through over a century of colonialism. The neighbourhood, euphemistically referred to as Japantown, has repeatedly witnessed waves of dispossession and displacement that continue today. The culmination of a three-year Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council of Canada (SSHRC)-funded research project and academic-community partnership, this multi-layered exhibition interprets the contradictions, co-optations, commemorations, heritage, and redress that have shaped the DTES in a creative re-possession of the human rights legacies of the area.

What was most compelling about *Revitalizing Japantown?* from a curatorial perspective was the question mark. The academic study raised questions such as: How does one revitalize something that has always been vital? What is the actual history of the DTES? How does a citizen of a democratic country espousing social justice reconcile forced displacement and dispossession with urban improvement? How can a neighbourhood be labelled by developers when those within it call it some-

thing else entirely? How do we engage the public in a way that encourages curiosity and dialogue, and elicits questions one might not have even thought to previously ask? How do we make textually dense research appealing to a museum audience? How do we visually translate complex scholarship?

We resolved the exhibit dilemma by working directly with not only the academics on the study, but also the community arts partners and artists from the DTES who were engaged with the study throughout the project.

**We invited enlightened brainstorming with our exhibit design team and cultivated a culture of collaboration.**

In their essay "A Continuous Fabric of Change" from the catalogue *Revitalizing Japantown? A Unifying Exploration of Human Rights, Branding, and Place* that accompanies the *Revitalizing Japantown?* exhibit, scholars Aaron Franks and Jeff Masuda relay the history of the research project behind the exhibit. Beginning in 2010, they posed the question, "what happens when Japanese Canadian history is appropriated into a cultural brand aimed at revitalizing a neighbourhood?". Two years lat-



**Above:** *Dispossession*, original photograph by Greg Masuda (2010).



er, Jeff Masuda and fellow project investigators Audrey Kobayashi, Sonia Bookman, Joyce Rock, and Beth Carter were successful in obtaining a SSHRC Partnership Development grant which brought together six advocacy and cultural organization partners from the DTES and the local Japanese Canadian community. As the project progressed, this grew to eight, including Gallery Gaget, the Greater Vancouver Japanese Canadian Citizens' Association, the Nikkei National Museum & Cultural Centre, PACE, the Potluck Café Society, the Powell Street Festival Society, and the Vancouver Japanese Language School and Japanese Hall. As part of project outcomes, exhibits on human rights and the Right to Remain in the DTES/*Paueru-gai* were held at Gallery Gaget in Spring of 2015 and at the Nikkei National Museum in winter 2015/2016. The Gallery Gaget exhibit featured the re-

**Above Left:** *Button Blanket* project. Photo credit: Kathy Shimizu.

sults of a peer-led *Right to Remain Community Fair* that was open to all and engaged hundreds of DTES residents, Japanese Canadians, and the Metropolitan Vancouver public through more than a dozen events over the course of a year. The Nikkei National Museum's task was to tell the tale of the entire research project, including related arts and community activities. As Franks and Masuda point out,

*the continuous story of exploitation and resistance in the DTES ultimately gives shape to a Right to Remain that is the hallmark of the neighbourhood. This is a right not merely to survive, but to live, create, and ultimately, positively influence the conditions of change that have shaped this tenuous but continuous community....By tying this place's long history of resilience and activism toward a Right to Remain denied and a Right to Remain achieved (time and again) into a singular concept, we seek to take on and displace this reputation by representing its past and present inhabitants not on the basis of their vulnerability but as astute and determined political leaders who have created a national legacy of Human Rights Achievement.*

To articulate all of this, four DTES artists who led workshops in the *Right to Remain Community Fair*, Quin Mar-



tins, Andy Mori, Karen Ward, and Herb Varley, agreed to represent each of the four 'rights' identified by the research study: The Right to Home, The Right to Culture, The Right to Have Rights, and the Right to History. Japanese Canadian artist Greg Masuda, whose artwork and documentary film were pivotal in the visuals of the exhibit, took exquisite portraits of each of these artists in a DTES location of their choice. The results were visually arresting, evocative, and dramatic when installed as 9ft X 11ft wallpaper on the four walls of the gallery. The centrepiece to the narrative was a to-scale abstract interpretation of a current-day Single Room Occupancy (SRO) residence with a 360-degree-view film by Greg Masuda of that same space projected onto one of the walls. A mobile version of the film could be downloaded onto a visitor's smart device to give a complete surround visual experience to a space that was otherwise a blank canvas. The entire structure was white on white, with cubes as placeholders for all of the furniture and possessions depicted in the film. Artwork borrowed from Coast Salish and additional DTES artists, as well as select pieces from the Nikkei National Museum's permanent collection, rounded out the contemporary art presentations woven into the display.

We gave full disclosure of our exhibit plans to Vancouver City planners, from whom we borrowed published development plans and artist renderings of past controversial ideas that were never realized. We scoured BC Archives for authentic photos that supported the narrative of

displacement, to give historical context to the posited contemporary opinions. We created an education portal in the exhibit where visitors could independently peruse related newspaper clippings and resource materials, and listen to excerpts from oral histories collected for this project.

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## We took an inclusive approach to articulating the complex issues presented in the study.

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The cooperative, consultative process that drove the exhibit development carried through to exhibit programming, which included a panel discussion on opening day with scholars Jeff Masuda and Audrey Kobayashi as well as representatives from Gallery Gachet and many of the artists included in the exhibit. Subsequent programming included a screening of Greg Masuda's *Right to Remain* documentary, which also aired on CBC, with a Q&A session including the filmmaker, Herb Varley, and Tom Delvecchio, the resident of the SRO showcased in the exhibit. A final programming event was *Pie Chats*, which brought together many residents from the DTES, the Seeing the Whole Picture project group from the DTES, and the Nikkei National Museum community for conversations over pie.

The Nikkei National Museum is a small museum which is dedicated to honour, preserve, and share Japanese Ca-



nadian history and culture for a better Canada. This exhibit gave us an opportunity to present an inclusive art exhibit that highlighted challenging human rights and current social issues connected to our mandate while presenting an interactive, contemporary audio-visual experience for visitors to enjoy. It was an occasion to educate as well as entertain.

We were able to produce all of this on time and on budget thanks to a small but dedicated cohort of museum staff and volunteers, designers Kathy Shimizu and Zoe Garred, and the creative collaboration of co-curators Beth Carter and Sherri Kajiwara. In the final week of the exhibit, the former acting deputy mayor of Vancouver came to tour the gallery, and was so inspired and enthusiastic about it that she immediately asked her staff to come see the display before it closed. She has proposed that the City of Vancouver travel the SRO component and main elements of the exhibit to City Hall in the fall of 2016 as part of their Homelessness Action Week. Follow-up meetings have ensued, including discussions of a possible pre-stop for the display at Oppenheimer Park in the DTES during the annual Powell Street Festival.

At the time of publication of this article, the museum has yet to receive confirmation from City Hall, but is encouraged by the prospect, and all of the positive public feedback during and following the exhibit.

**Above Left:** Installation pano 1.  
Photo credit: Sherri Kajiwara.

## One of the best comments this curator received was that the Revitalizing Japantown? exhibit demystified long-held stereotypes and feelings of aversion towards the DTES.

It set aside pre-conceived, reductionist notions of the area being one of sex, drugs, and misanthropes. It not only revealed a complex history, but put a face to the place and made personal what was once merely abstract.

**Sherri Kajiwara, Director/Curator of the Nikkei National Museum in Burnaby, BC, has been a fine arts professional since 1992 as a gallerist, director/owner, writer, editor, and curator. She holds a B.Comm from the Sauder School of Business, UBC, and is a graduate of the Vancouver Board of Trade's Leadership program.**

