

URBAN RENEWAL, NEGRO REMOVAL AND SELF-DETERMINATION IN VANCOUVER'S EAST END

By Wayde Compton

In 1967 the Non-Partisan Association, the pro-capitalist civic party, revealed plans to extend the Trans-Canada highway into and through Vancouver. The NPA-appointed Vancouver Planning Commission had designed the route in secret, without consulting any of the people who would be displaced and affected by this plan. The freeway was to obliterate the southern part of Strathcona. All of the houses facing Prior and Union streets, and Chinatown through Carrall Street, were to become an eight-lane freeway, effectively eviscerating the East End.

The terminus of this freeway plan was a cryptically-named "Project 200", a massive, multiple-building development intended for the waterfront west of Gastown. The plans for both the freeway and Project 200, while kept from the public, were formulated in concert with several large land-owning entities and interests that stood to gain, including the Downtown Business Association and the Vancouver Board of Trade. Like the NPA itself, this so-called urban renewal plan was a creature of the rich.

The fact that the NPA freeway plan was chosen to lie directly on the site of Hogan's Alley – a poor immigrant neighbourhood with a small black community at its centre – is something I have never been able to accept as coincidence. The story of interurban freeways being run through black neighbourhoods was so common in the mid-twentieth century that African Americans had their own term for these grand plans of the developing class – to those affected, in inner city after inner city during the 1950s and '60s, "urban renewal" was referred to sardonically as "Negro removal." I think that the proverbial acronym NIMBY – "Not in my backyard" – would more aptly have been called, during those racist times, PIIANBY: "Put it in a nigger's backyard."

In the USA, the infamously inhuman system of high rise housing projects, known for their violence and neglect, were created using the exact same ideology and tactics exemplified by the NPA's 1967 plan in Vancouver: a freeway to serve business development was proposed; a black neighbourhood was targeted for the site; housing projects were built to warehouse the black residents; and the whole thing was rammed through by a cabal of planners and capitalists under the euphemism of "renewal."

After the NPA announced their 1967 plan, they were met with fierce and unexpected resistance from the ad hoc group of locals who called themselves the Strathcona Property Owners and Tenants Association (SPOTA), supported by many sympathetic leftists. While SPOTA managed to stop the larger freeway plan, the first stage, the Georgia and Dunsmuir viaducts, were completed anyway. Vancouver's once and only African Canadian local sphere of influence was sold out for those two concrete ramps you drive over to get to the downtown core.

The loss of Hogan's Alley's black-owned restaurants, night-clubs and residences to the top-down urban planning of the NPA affected Vancouver's black community in ways that linger to this day. The community did not largely move to the McLean Park projects, but rather scattered throughout Greater Vancouver. In this way, black East Enders out-foxed the plan, and side-stepped "Negro removal" – they were removed, yes, but not to the projects. They seized that pivotal moment to fully and finally integrate – not an outcome that the elites expected or planned.

What was the cost of this community destruction and subsequent integration? This has yet to be told. Whether or not total integration was good or ill for the black community in Vancouver – and there are plausible arguments either way – there is no doubt that it would have been better had the residents of Hogan's Alley and the old East End been allowed to improve and retain their homes according to their own needs and wishes. Lessons to be drawn from that era are that a developer-led civic government will always seek to sacrifice the poorest, most vulnerable community for capital; and that community groups like SPOTA and its allies can shut down such plans if they act with unity. I see no essential difference between the NPA of 1967 and the NPA of 2007 – whether it is Plan 200 or the 2010 Olympics, their goals are to enrich developers, big business and global capital. Forty years ago, Vancouver's black community happened to be the collateral damage in that battle against the NPA. In the current campaign for social housing there have been and will be others, but as long as there is a willingness to fight back, the ideology that puts profits before people can be defeated.

