

# Speaking Notes: Public Hearing on 105 Keefer

Nathan Edelson May 25, 2017

I am here to speak in support of Beedie Living; at a culturally appropriate site.

As so many speakers have said so well, Chinatown is a very important part of the history of our City and Country. As the Chinatown Memorial Square reminds us every day, it is the only place where Chinese people – who came in desperate poverty to build the railroads and mines – could own property; who fought in two world wars for Canada before they had the right to vote.

When I was the senior planner for the Downtown Eastside and Chinatown, with Wendy Au's support, I realized that if we were to connect with the community we had to hire staff of Chinese descent. Professionals who could speak the language and understand the culture. We needed one or two such staff; but many more joined our team – because they were the most qualified to work throughout the complex inner city. These include Jessica Cheng – who instrumental in helping the Mah Family Association renovate its building on Pender Street, Helen Ma, and Yan Zeng– who contributed much to our work and remain involved.

Several years ago I spoke in support of the conclusions of the Chinatown Height Review. I did this not because I agreed with its conclusions, but because after three years, it had become a form of Vancouver Planning Torture that was seriously dividing the community – which need to be as united as possible to help realize the incredible potential of this historic neighbourhood.

My sense was it would be better to see what several buildings might look like so we could be in a position to end this endless debate.

Well we have seen the result. Go down to Main and Keefer and spot the large buildings. Is their design really appropriate to Chinatown? Some contain a few units of social housing, but they primarily house middle income people from other cultures.

At the retail level they contain large new facilities that are also geared to the wider population

- Juniper
- Jukes
- Pacific Poke
- Virtuous Pizza Pie
- Other similar shops
- And the inevitable Starbucks

Perhaps more importantly, speculation based on anticipated rezoning has resulted in dramatically rising rents and many culturally appropriate traditional businesses being displaced.

The key to an authentic revitalization of Chinatown is that we must pay serious attention not just to the design of buildings – but to their uses. Of particular importance is to create places

that house Chinese seniors – many of whom still speak the language; purchase traditional foods and goods; and attract their children and grandchildren.

The youth – many of whom have spoken to you and others who have helped organize not only opposition this proposal, but support for a cultural renaissance in Chinatown - are also an essential part of an authentic Chinatown future. I am most proud of the work Jessica, Helen and many others have done to inspire young people of Chinese descent to refocus attention on the cultural and historic significance of this neighbourhood.

And that future needs space for experimental cultural facilities such as Centre A and mahjong parties and places where martial arts, music, dance and other aspects of traditional and emerging Chinese culture are taught and learned.

That said, not every building needs to be targeted toward Chinese culture, but there needs to be a critical mass. And strategic sites such as 105 Keefer need to be given special attention.

I had the honour of spending more than a year working with Joe Wai, Henry Yu, Ian McLennan, Jan Walls and others to explore what this site might yield – containing an interactive cultural facility; space for some of the emerging cultural organizations and small businesses as well as a considerable amount of housing targeted to Chinese seniors.

Several of us spoke a number times with representatives of the Beedie group and their consultants to see if they would accommodate our suggestions or to find a way to exchange this site for another that would be more consistent with their business aspirations. Our suggestions were not taken into account.

As a result, this is the third or fourth time many of us have had to speak out against proposals for Beedie Living at 105 Keefer. So much energy has had to be put into both sides. It has become like Night of the Beedie Living Dead – arising from the ashes of failed proposals and coming back time after time in a way that feels abusive of a community's resilience and the work of staff and Council.

As a Council, you have pursued many important and historic initiatives. Of particular importance is your work to make reconciliation with the Coast Salish nations on whose unceded land we live.

The situation is different, but not totally dissimilar. Chinese settlers were exploited and had their rights suspended. As recently as the 1960's their land was expropriated to make way for the Georgia and Dunsmuir viaducts in what was intended to be a system of freeways that would have destroyed so much of Vancouver's historic core.

It was the people of Chinatown and Strathcona that led the fight that spread across the city to stop the freeways and help make Vancouver among the most livable cities in the world.

It is now possible to envision a Chinatown that is revitalized in a way that respects the past and points to our future – as Canada’s gateway to Asia.

In a few months, I believe you will be asked to consider new ways of respecting the culture of Chinatown in its revitalization. Possibly to impose a freeze on rezoning and finding other ways to support this incredible neighbourhood.

When you make your decision about this site, think of the City Councils of the 1970’s – Art Phillips, Fritz Bowers, May Brown, Marguerite Ford, William Gibson, Mike Harcourt, Walter Hardwick, Darlene Marzari, George Puil, Harry Rankin others whose names many of us still recall. How many of the members of the previous Council can you name? Tom Campbell the Mayor of the Gastown Riot who tried to railroad freeways across the city and?

People of different political perspectives – against all odds - took on the freeway and stopped it. They created a new planned community of False Creek South and supported development of Granville Island and set a standard for what has become new urbanism and diverse communities.

They did equivocate as they might have by approving one link of the freeway – because the designs were completed; because the funding might have been made available; because all other major cities were building freeways - filled with good intentions.

Anticipating Nancy Regan, Vancouver’s Council just said “NO” to the Freeway and set the stage for why it is now possible to restore Chinatown as a vibrant and authentic historic community.

As I mentioned, I am in support of Beedie living – but on an appropriate site. Perhaps near the Georgia Viaduct land. I suspect that if a land swap could be achieved, Beedie would be strongly supported by the Chinatown community and might be proud to contribute to a culturally appropriate building at 105 Keefer. This would end its sentence to failed proposal after failed proposal in its long night of the living dead.

And if this proposal succeeds or if it fails and Beedie decides to build within the current zoning, Beedie Living will likely become a symbol of will likely be termed Cultural Expropriation. And that would be a missed opportunity not only for Chinatown, but for a company that has done many good developments.