

# Lighting up the Downtown Eastside

BY JOHN MACKIE, VANCOUVER SUN JANUARY 7, 2009 2:03 PM



The new Pennsylvania Hotel neon sign, three-storeys high, has gone up at Carrall and Hastings in one of the city's most colourful neighborhoods. /. [PNG Merlin Archive]

**Photograph by:** Mark van Manen, Vancouver Sun

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VANCOUVER -- You wouldn't think a sign would have that big an impact on a street. But a new three-storey-high neon sign for the Pennsylvania Hotel has completely transformed the corner of Carrall and Hastings.

What had been one of the most dingy, decrepit corners in the Downtown Eastside is suddenly vibrant and beautiful, a potent symbol for the long-awaited rejuvenation of the troubled neighbourhood. Moreover, the neon sign is the coup de grace on one of Vancouver's most extensive heritage restorations.

"The neon is almost like the jewelry on the building," said Don Luxton, the heritage consultant on the Pennsylvania restoration.

"It's the finishing touch, the thing you have to have to make it complete."

The sign is a replica of the Pennsylvania's original 1920s neon. It has cool, clean, elegant art deco lines, with white neon letters and amber and reddish-orange neon borders. Built by Knight Signs, it's probably the first neon sign to be erected in the old downtown since

neon went out of fashion in the 1960s.

The \$47,000 sign is part of an \$11-million restoration of the Pennsylvania, which opened in 1906 as the Woods and also operated as the Rainbow and Portland. The official reopening was Wednesday.

The five-storey building was purchased by the non-profit Portland Hotel Society in 2001 for \$2,178,000, but has sat empty for the past eight years while the PHS lined up funding sources for the restoration. That money came from all three levels of government, along with \$3.6 million in heritage bonus density transfers the PHS sold to Concord-Pacific.

When it closed, the hotel had 70 tiny single-room occupancy units. The upper floors have been remodelled and expanded into 44 bright, airy bachelor suites with their own kitchenettes and washrooms.

“The residents are people from the Downtown Eastside who were at risk of homelessness, or homeless,” said Tom Laviolette of the PHS.

“Some folks came from older SROs, and some came from the street.”

Among them is Ron McFarlane, who said the new units are “great.”

“It’s nice moving in here, it’s clean, and hopefully it’s quiet,” said McFarlane, 44.

“You’re influenced by your environment — you’re influenced by the company you keep and your environment. I find living down here sucks in general, it just pulls on you. There’s not very many, if any, people you can develop a trusting rapport with at all, it just doesn’t exist. This is a step in the right direction for me, now I’m going to try and get some work happening.”

The neon sign is the last piece in a detailed restoration that included the rebuilding of a turret for the roof, the first turret to be erected on a Vancouver commercial building in a century.

The exterior of the building is almost completely clad in metal sheeting, which had badly deteriorated and has largely been replaced. Some missing cornices and dentil work also went back up, and the old “areaways” under the sidewalk have also been resurrected.

Areaways are small spaces underneath those small squares of purple glass you see dotting the sidewalks in the old downtown. They were basically a way for merchants to expand their businesses underground. In this case, the PHS imported new, reinforced glass from Florida to go with a new, structurally reinforced sidewalk.

“Those light wells were shipped from Florida,” Laviolette said. “A truck can drive over them and they can withstand the weight.”

The areaways are one of the key features in a two-storey, 2,200- square-foot space at the back of the hotel that the PHS hopes to rent out as a 130-seat restaurant. The restaurant space also contains the Woods Hotel’s elaborate metal “bird cage” elevator, which doesn’t work anymore but is drop-dead gorgeous.

The building was designed in a popular San Francisco style of the time which featured rows of bay windows up and down the length of the building.

“The bay windows make it light,” said artist Hank Bull, who runs an art gallery across the street.

“This was the equivalent of the glass tower [of today]. This was the first glass tower in Vancouver.”

Bull has been working in and around the Downtown Eastside for decades. He hopes the Pennsylvania restoration, and its neon sign, will spark a resurrection of what was once a very happening area.

“I watched them put the sign up in the middle of a blizzard around Christmas time, and they did a great job,” he said.

“They worked right into the night and had the lights on by 7 p.m. in the dark. Look at the way it goes with the Only Seafoods [neon sign]. Let’s bring the neon back to Hastings Street! This was the street of light, and now it’s coming back.”

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