

# The Gastown Riot as Public Art

By Shaun Dacey 17 Feb 2010 | Megaphone Magazine

Shaun Dacey wrote this article for the special Olympics issue of Megaphone Magazine, Vancouver's Street Newspaper, which is now on sale by sidewalk vendors.



**'Abbott & Cordova, 7 August 1971' by Stan Douglas.**

Visitors to the newly opened Woodward's complex are greeted by an unexpected scene: a chaotic street battle, where police with batons drag defiant hippies into the back of a van, and officers on horseback corral crowds of longhaired men and women. Spectators to the event are huddled against storefront walls while rioters flee through the streets for safety.

The scene is from a massive photo installation that now hangs above the Woodward's atrium. Spanning 50 by 30 feet, it is a depiction that is at once familiar yet foreign to Vancouverites -- the type of imagery usually broadcast from foreign cities and far away conflicts. But for people of a certain generation, this image revives forgotten memories of Vancouver. The stores in the

background, the uniforms of the police and the vintage of vehicles are all meant to remind one of a Vancouver from an earlier time.

Entitled “Abbott & Cordova, 7 August 1971,” the gigantic image by Vancouver artist Stan Douglas is a representation of a little known but crucial moment in Vancouver and the Downtown Eastside’s history. On that date, Vancouver police, in full riot gear, violently broke up a Smoke-In, a peaceful marijuana protest, inciting mayhem and destruction on Gastown’s streets. This event was the climax to heightened tensions between local government, hippies squatting in empty industrial buildings throughout Gastown and the predominately blue-collar families that had populated the neighbourhood for over a century.

The riot, also known as the Battle of Maple Tree Square, ultimately led to the city zoning the area as strictly commercial. With this banning of residential use, the community’s social infrastructures slowly collapsed and, in a neighbourhood rife with disunity, economic and social class divisions emerged. Through his photo installation, Douglas is reviving a lost memory, highlighting a decisive shift in the use and policing of public space in Vancouver.

Although representing the past, Douglas’s image is very much concerned with the current status of the Downtown Eastside. When asked by Megaphone why he chose to reenact the events of 1971 for the Woodward’s atrium, Douglas drew a connection with the new development.

“The riot was a critical juncture in the history of the Downtown Eastside,” he said. “It affected civic attitudes toward the neighbourhood that would eventually be manifest in zoning and policing policies. The Woodward’s complex is itself another juncture, but hopefully a more positive one.”

Officially opened on Jan. 15, Douglas’s image is an interesting and compelling addition to the much talked about and immediately iconic Woodward’s development. The installation is in the main public atrium of this new cultural epicentre, which offers a mix of community space, university classrooms, galleries, shops, subsidized housing and private luxury condos. The provincial and municipal governments, as well as developers, have invested hundreds of millions of dollars in this development with the hope of creating a safe public space to ignite interest and capital investment in the middle of this problematic community.

The Gastown image revives a history many may have forgotten and many more have no knowledge of. This is why Douglas says that “public art can be more than just large-scale decoration.” The image installed at Woodward’s has the potential to create conversation and dialogue about the new Downtown Eastside community. It has already happened through press coverage of the installation, which has focused on re-telling the riotous history it emerged from. Much like a billboard advertisement in scale, Douglas’ work stands as marker of the complexities and struggles in the area -- past, present and future.