

**TITLE: The Vacant and Empty Tour**

by Bill Richardson

*Voice of Aaron Chapman:* Welcome to segment 5 of the West End Car Free Day Storytellers series.

Bill's tour will take us from here at Gilford and Stovold, up to the Robson Public Market, open everyday from 9am to 9pm and finish just up on Robson and Broughton where I will meet you one last time to say our farewells..."

Bill Richardson lives in Vancouver and in the Rural Municipality of Louise in southwest Manitoba. But he's been a West End resident for most of his more than 40 years in the city. His most recent book is a collection of stories, set in the West End called *I Saw Three Ships: West End Stories*, and is published by Talonbooks. Bill's one of my favorite storytellers in town, and I'm pleased he could join us on this tour.

*Voice of Bill Richardson:* Neglected cemeteries, derelict alleys, the moodier / spookier parts of the forest: I'm a melancholy person who's drawn to melancholy places. These are banner days for someone in whose veins this unappealing humour runs thick; of melancholy places, in the West End, in our topsy-turvy here and now, there's no dearth. This short ramble — I call it the Vacant and Empty Tour — will allow you to visit, if not exactly enjoy, some of the local sites that make me say, "Bonjour, Tristesse."



At Gilford and Stovold Lane. Photo: B.Richardson

Commence at the northwest corner of Stovold Lane and Gilford Street, in the semi-derelict mini-park that was installed, as I recall, as a traffic calming measure, years and years ago: a good place to begin, since we're celebrating the possibility of carless-ness.

Cast down thine eyes. I draw your attention to the faded shuffleboard court, painted onto the pavement. This must have been the brainchild of the long-ago park planners, deeding to the locals the opportunity for some wholesome recreation. I've passed through this park thousands of times and never once have I seen anyone take advantage of this restorative possibility. Uncared for, weedy, crumbling, the court has been claimed by the neighbourhood smokers who gather on the nearby bench, in the shelter of the

hedge, and gossip and laugh and fill the air with pungent, acrid ghosts. They are a genial lot, for sure, a welcome presence. Even so, the overall impression one takes away from the park just now, is less shuffleboard than shuffle, bored.

On your left, as you face north, is the Buchan Hotel. Untenanted latterly, and just purchased by the province to provide supportive housing for women. As we move towards the front of the building towards Haro Street I'll note that there's been much talk in the neighbourhood of late that something like this might be in the works, and the conversation, predictably, has excited both trepidation and anticipation. I'm glad there'll be new life in the Buchan which is haunted, for me, by the ghosts of brunches and dinners past. Memories of countless merry meals enjoyed, 30 years ago, at Delilah's, a legendary watering hole where many a mimosa was downed by day, and many a martini by night. It was a wonderfully opulent, stylish room. On the ceiling was a fresco, a camp masterpiece painted in high Renaissance style, by Brent Beattie, if memory serves. It was all very Sistine Chapel, very last days of Pompeii. A number of beaneries have come and gone, post-Delilah's, on the Buchan's main floor; Robba da Matti has recently reopened, after its pandemic hiatus.

Proceed north, cross Haro Street, past the long-lingering and unholy aggregation of construction detritus that renders useless what was once a pleasant green space, enjoyed by many.

Continue north to Robson Street, and gird your loins for turning east. As you pivot, pause, and take note, on your left, of the first of two large, grassy lots that are part of our Vacant and Empty tour, sites that were spared development, in development's heyday, so recently expired. Latterly, this appealingly feral space has been formalized, a little, by the placement of a bench and a tasteful sign proclaiming it "Lost Lagoon Park." For years, there were two tarpaulin-covered mounds here; what I was told, by not necessarily reliable sources, is that the tarps concealed large and valuable chunks of jade. This struck me as unlikely, somehow, but that was the word on the street: jade under wraps. Urban myth? Probably. The "line of desire" that bisects the lot on the diagonal was once a busy skunk highway; this year the skunks have abandoned the neighbourhood, who knows why? I love the skunks, and their absence is an underreported insult and injury. With everything else we've lost, surely we shouldn't also be skunkless.



A sign now marks this lot as a park, once a busy skunk highway. Photo: B.Richardson

Proceed along Robson and cross Denman, heading east, towards the downtown core. You'll want to be on the *south* side of the street; your next destination is 1610, the Robson Public Market (RPM) about a three minute stroll, depending on your luck with lights.

[music as the listener travels]

The RPM's lofty, glassy, vaulted ceiling lends it the look of an ambitious train station in some off-the-beaten-path, middle-European burg.

There are three entrances into the market. There's not much to recommend one over the other, apart from the important question of accessibility. If stairs are difficult or impossible, pass through the doors at Robson and Cardero. Once in the market, you can wander lonely as a cloud, in whatever direction you choose. Not much will impede your progress, whether on the lower or upper level; again, if stairs present a problem, an elevator is available.

[music fades out]

I do recommend spending some time upstairs, if only to enjoy the many, many well-tended houseplants that proliferate there. They're lovely, and will leave you with the impression, however fleeting, that you've stumbled upon some inexplicably abandoned conservatory.

The RPM wouldn't always have found a place on a tour of the vacant and empty. There was a time, perhaps 15 years ago, when a shopper, bound for home after a hard day's work, could stop in the market and acquire pretty much everything needed for a well-balanced supper. Now, you can buy insurance, very good meat from the excellent butcher, and luggage. There's a store with two mannequins in bee-keeper garb that sells honey, only honey. Also, you can get your haircut — that's where I have my own splendid, flowing tresses tended — and there are a few restaurants, modest in decor but with consistently tasty fare: super duper dumplings upstairs! So, it's not lifeless, it's just that the cells of activity are so few and so intermittently attended that the overwhelming sense is one of torpor.

It puts me in mind of one of those forsaken malls the survivors of the apocalypse in *The Walking Dead* are forever discovering and exploring, hoping to locate a stray tin of something edible, and then zombies burst through the walls or stream from the loading dock and gnaw someone to smithereens.

The Robson Public Market puzzles and frustrates. It's emblematic of an intractable dilemma. The few remaining working operations are good, are patronized. There is no reason why it couldn't be a really terrific amenity. Why is it so under-used, so sub-par? The pandemic hasn't helped, but this is a situation of long standing that predates the Covidian quotidian by years. I would speculate — please note, speculation is all this is — that whoever owns the market and might steer its development has little interest in seeing it evolve into what it could and should be, a site of engagement, a community pulse point. I can imagine how, if city regulations were to allow, and if the incentives were right, young entrepreneurs who might benefit from a brick and mortar's presence for a bookshop, an incense stand, a mini-emporium to sell wind-ups or ceramics or jewelry or bonsai or whatever would fill the many voids.

The Robson Public Market, with work and vision, could be a lively bazaar rather than a glass-domed ghost town; and, in fact, pre-Corona I was happy to see that a group of board game players had planted their flag and claimed some of the uncolonized tables on the second floor, had just taken them over. Perhaps that will continue, as social distancing measures ease; I hope so. This clear proof that emptiness wants to be filled, and that working ways can be found, makes the environment the more aggravating, nonsensical. Why these vast, depopulated aisles, these hollowed out, caged enclosures, why this bucket in the middle of it all owing to the leak in the ceiling? It's maddening, it's heartbreaking, it's a tiny bit insane. If anyone can tell me what about this makes sense, I'm here to listen. This is where we live. What have we done to merit this "you don't deserve nice things" treatment? It makes me sad, sadder, even, than one who *likes* to be sad likes to be.



Inside the Robson Public Market. Photo: B.Richardson

Exit the market by those accessible north-east doors, cross to the north side of Robson, and continue your eastward trek. Pause at number 1555 to consider what used to be The Chocolate Mousse. This was a busy, inviting cookware store. After more than 30 years in business, the two friendly and knowledgeable sisters who ran it were forced to close when their combined rent and tax assessment increased by something like seven trillion per cent. A successful, charming, useful, and independent small business was shuttered, and to make way for what? The storefront has been empty for almost two years. In the window is a “For Lease” sign — good luck with that, I say. If you look beyond the sign, into the store itself, you’ll see concrete rubble from someone’s jack hammering, and a single quixotic broom. *Who won here?* is the question I find myself wanting to ask

We’re almost done our tour now, which news likely comes to you as a relief. Walk a block further east, past the Riviera Hotel. Look, on your left, for the big old tree and the bench where you can sit and rest and enjoy the shade or the sound of raindrops on maple leaves. We’ll end our time together here, contemplating this persistent and inspiring example of emptiness, the vacant lot on the northwest corner of Robson and Broughton. The colourfully tagged foundation walls of whatever stood there before are still visible, the grass is reasonably well-tended, the pigeons strut and peck along the diagonal “line of desire” that dogs and their walkers enjoy and that pedestrians tread to shorten, by a few seconds, the distance between Robson and Alberni. In its decades-long consistency, its unadornment, its absence of ambition, this place is weirdly comforting, reassuring. I’ve been in Vancouver for more than forty years and this lot is one of the few recognizable features of that city, in that time.



That vertical line of desire. Photo: B.Richardson

As you disperse, consider how emptiness is one way a city expresses its hunger. But for what? Our job, as citizens, is to answer that question, and then to find the best, the most intelligent remedies. In these extraordinary times, when so much is being reconsidered, remeasured, reweighed, and revalued, perhaps it's not too much to hope that we might successfully address that hunger. Much as I hate to admit it, as a dyed-in-the-wool curmudgeon, I'd be willing to give up just a bit of my beloved melancholy to see that happen.

*Voice of Aaron Chapman:* Thanks Bill. Bill's one of my favourite writers and storytellers in town, and I'm pleased he could join us on this tour.

Car Free Day would like to thank the Department of Canadian Heritage and the West End Business Improvement Association for their continued support, JAR Audio for their sponsorship, and also for their stellar stewardship in helping produce this series, and to all our amazing storytellers for helping us to make social distancing just a little bit more fun, and amazing. If you've liked what you've heard, don't forget to share this podcast walking tour with your friends, or leave us a review. You can find out more about this podcast, and lots more about Car Free West End at our website [car free vancouver dot org slash west hyphen end](http://carfreevancouver.org/west-end). Thanks for listening.