



CENTRE FOR DIALOGUE
SIMON FRASER UNIVERSITY



Reimagine alleyways in a major city for just a moment.

Can you do it?

They're generally grungy, dark, dank places that you never want to enter, let alone think about. Well, think again.

Ackery's Alley and Alley-Oop are two back lanes that have been transformed from forgotten spaces where, during the day, the trash gets picked up and deliveries are made, and at night, are the stomping grounds of dumpster divers, drug users, and sex trade workers.

In downtown Vancouver, there are approximately 240 alleys. That's about 180,000 square meters of publicly owned land.

Reclaiming those public spaces in an ever-expanding city would be a needed improvement.

Yes, you heard that right, public space.

And I know you're thinking, well public to whom?

Well you and me and Korean pop stars. You may have seen the YouTube sensation where the K-pop group Twice used the refurbished Alley-Oop as one of its Vancouver backdrops. When I wrote this intro, there were just shy of 76 million views.

So density's forcing us to find space, but more importantly, it's forcing us to be innovators in the creation of livable space.

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We sat down with Charles Gauthier of the Downtown Vancouver Business Improvement Association to ask him what the motivation for this project was, why it's important, and what the value is to all of us who call this city home, not just the businesses he represents.

And we also talked to Alexandra Kenyon of the design firm HCMA, on why her firm leapt at the opportunity to be a part of this project. What does a project like this say about the way that we're reshaping Vancouver.

And finally, we sat down with the artist Alex Bein, who sees revitalized alleys as a way to get people to actually interact and talk to one another. We did this for a conversation that matters about alleyways as public spaces.

- [Voiceover] Conversations That Matter is a partner program for the Center for Dialogue at Simon Fraser University. The production of this program is made possible thanks to the support of the following and viewers like you.

- Charles Gauthier, welcome back.

- Thank you.

- You know, it was two years ago that you were last here, and you were just releasing Reimagine Vancouver, your envisioning project about what Vancouver would look like in the coming decades. What ground have we covered in these last two years when we take a look at the way that we're starting to reshape downtown Vancouver in particular?

- One project that we were able to get a grasp on and get moving quickly was the transformation of an alleyway off Hastings Street in Granville, and transform it into more of a public, people space than what it was before in terms of a service corridor for dumpsters and commercial vehicles.

- How difficult was it to make that happen?

- We were reinventing a lot of systems and changes that we needed to work with at City Hall. There weren't permits that existed for this, and just as much as we were learning, they had to modify what they had to do. And we had a point person assigned from the city to work with one of our staff to make it happen. It was extremely challenging to pull off, but like anything else in terms of being a pilot project, something that was brand new, we now have a legacy project which was the springboard for the second alleyway that is currently being done, which is called Ackery's Alley, which is between the Orpheum and the Commodore Ballroom, just off Granville Street. So now that we've got that first one ironed out, we were able to provide a precedent to move forward with the second one.

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- But as you pointed out, you need to have cooperation from the city, you need to have cooperation from the businesses that are in the area, and other stakeholders. What's the argument that you put forward to say, geez, let's re-envision what this alley looks like. Because it doesn't look like an alley any longer, it looks like a really fun place to hang out, actually. And I was amazed when I went through there the number of people who were going in and just getting their picture taken, and other people were playing basketball. It was quite active, and it's something you don't see very often, and so I can see arguments going either way. Is this good for us, or is it gonna get in the way of our business?

- Well, let me answer the first part of your question, was it easy and how did you get people to adopt it. Certainly with the expertise of HCMA Architecture and Design, they were able to do mock-ups and models, they were able to illustrate to our stakeholders, the building owners in the city, what it would look like when it would be done. So that was really important, and all the imagery that comes with it. And then certainly, the background material of "this has been done in other cities." So there are lots of precedents around the world where alleyways can be transformed into something totally fun and different. So with all that work done, we were able to go forward to the building owners and to the city and get them on board with the idea. And the city came forward with a grant, which was really helpful in terms of covering costs to transform that lane way, and then the building owners had to give approval for us to paint their buildings a different color, and also attach structures, because there's now an orb in that back alley, which is a locator for people to easily find the lane way, other than the bright colors.

- Right. So, you go ahead to go do this. What did you present that you believed would be the benefits to the area, and what has materialized?

- That was a bit of a hope-this-works type of scenario, but it was about totally transforming the way the alleyway would be used. We had lots of data on the fact that very few people were using the alleyway to get from point A to point B. We knew how many commercial vehicles were going in there, we knew all the mechanics of it. That was all the work that HCMA had done by putting a camera up above on one of the buildings to monitor what was going on. So we knew there was very little foot traffic, and we wanted to change that, and we also wanted to change the gender balance in who was using the alleyway. So we knew mostly men were using the alleyway before, and our goal was to get almost equal parity between men and women using the alleyway and feeling comfortable. And women won't use the alleyway unless it's from their perspective very safe. And we've been able to achieve that. That lane way is bright, not only in colors but it's got lighting for the evenings, and then there's a lot of people there. And then we also wrapped around the two sidewalk patios of the coffee shops at either end of the lane way, and they're now activating that and have taken ownership, stewardship of the space. So it took a lot of people to come together and transform that alleyway, but we were successful in doing it, and the lane way is now a success story because it's heavily used, not just for service vehicles but also by people, and it's used for people to go and shoot some hoops when the weather is cooperating.

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- So what does that do to the dynamic of that city block or that area? How does it change the nature of it?

- Well I think it basically does a number of things. One is that it becomes a playground for people that want to go and use it to play basketball. There's been a number of impromptu as well as organized events in that back alley as a result of it. We're having a discussion soon with the city of Vancouver about how do we allow groups to come in and use it for private functions. So it's now become a very usable space, and one that can potentially generate some rent for the city for people that want to use it for private functions and not allow public access.

- When you were first proposing this, I thought okay, there's a considerable number of hours at night where you're not gonna have this high level of activity. Now we know that the mix of people who move into the city at night is different than those who are there during the day. And I worried that there was going to be potential marring of the space. How has it fared, knowing that you can't have security guards posted there 24 hours a day?

- I think it's fared better than what we thought it would. We thought we might have to spend a bit more money in terms of doing graffiti abatement, we thought we might have to spend a little bit more money to replace the basketball hoop, I mean, we've done those things, but not to the extent that we thought. Certainly it requires a little bit more cleaning than we had anticipated, primarily because it's gonna get a little bit of abuse, but having said all that, I think on a balance sheet, I think certainly it's definitely an asset versus a liability, and it's a much better space than what we had before. And I think that's how I would measure it at the end of the day.

- So you talked about safety. Has there been an impact from the perspective of people who are in the area feeling safer? Not just there, but onto Granville and Seymour Streets as well.

- Yeah, I think there's a bit of a halo effect, if I can call it that, that that is a much safer space, and I think it's actually now made the block area a lot more safe. There's a lot more people in that alleyway. I've been in that alley almost at every hour of the day, with the exception of the wee hours of the morning, and there's always people there, and they're typically taking photographs, depending on the weather they're also shooting hoops. So I think it's what we've achieved, and we've also done other events there or other people have hosted events there. There was a disco event there during the summer, hugely successful, and then we've had other groups that have already said, "We wanna use that space for our own private functions." And I'm also starting to see the space being featured in a number of different ads.

- How has it benefited your members then who are directly impacted by this?

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- Well I think how it's benefited them is I think they realize now that a variety of different place making interventions like doing an alleyway can have a dramatic difference to the bottom line for them as well. I think their space becomes more leaseable, more favorable, because we're all trying to attract a younger workforce to come and work for us, and so now we've added a playground in that area. A number of other building owners throughout the 90-block district have said, "Hey, we would like to transform "our back alley into something different." And we're saying, "Listen, we've got a toolkit. "We're not gonna be able to do "all 90 blocks within our area, "but here's a toolkit of how you can get it done." I think the fact that we've now transformed what I would call the city permit process and how to deal with something that's a little bit out of the box, I think we've made it easier for them to proceed to do this. So I'm hoping that in a short time frame, we're gonna see the lane ways becoming a much more valued public space than just the service corridor or somewhere where you put a dumpster and vehicles are there to service the business.

- So I gotta get you to hang on for a second while we take a quick commercial break. We'll be right back.

- [Voiceover] Conversations That Matter is a not-for-profit program made possible thanks to the charitable support of the following and from viewers like you. Please visit ConversationsThatMatter.tv and help us to continue to produce this program.

- Alexandra Kenyon, welcome, thanks for joining us in this interesting sort of discussion about the redevelopment of urban landscapes, especially ones that have been forgotten. Why did your company want to get involved in this? Because when it came up you kinda jumped in and said, "Yeah, we wanna be a part of this." How come?

- So the reason that we got involved is it gives us context and an understanding of the neighborhood and of our community, not only in terms of who is there but what the physical spaces are that we're going to be either working in or around. So kinda getting to know those nitty gritty spaces that aren't the big public plaza, that aren't the shopping mall, these are the kind of secret spots in the city. And getting to know those gives you a completely different sense of the city. So yeah, we found that to be very important.

- So I've been up and down Alley-Oop a number of times, and you can see that it's already drawing people. Why is it important that we transform those places that have just been service, well, designed for service use, and now they're becoming public spaces? What's the value to an urban environment in doing that?

- Obviously we're under a significant amount of pressure in Vancouver with real estate prices being driven sky high. That puts a tremendous amount of pressure on public space in the city as well. So reclaiming public space where we can find it is kind of the underlying agenda behind these lane way revitalization projects. They are publicly owned land. In the downtown corridor there are about 240 lane
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ways that are each about 6.5 meters wide. When you add that all up, it's about 180,000 square meters of space, which is a huge amount of publicly-owned land that we think of as the back side.

- Well, and we tend to stay away from it because it looks like it smells, and it looks like there might be somebody there that could be a threat.

- That's right. So that was our task, you know, is how to flip that. Lane ways we think of as the undesirable areas. That's where the things you don't wanna do on the front side of buildings, you do in the back lane. That's the illicit side. So that was our design problem, really, was how do we make this into a new, it's not the front side, it's never gonna be the front side. It needs a new identity and a completely new draw. So Alley-Oop was the way that we tested that, and the kind of way that we approached it was to say, "Okay, this is the business district. "Alley-Oop is located at Hastings and Granville. "There are offices all around, there are coffee shops. "It's got a culture of business. "So what could we add there that would "kind of offset that business, that work culture?" And so what we designed was a play space, something that allows people who are on their work break or going to a coffee meeting or whatever it is that they're out and about, it allows them to go into a place and play, whatever that might mean to them.

- And the benefits are enormous, aren't they?

- They're immeasurable. There are so many different types of benefits I would say. One of the clearest ones, the downtown BIA, after the project was completed they took statistics, actually they took statistics before and after, and found that the pedestrian activity had basically tripled, and the number of women in particular had risen significantly to represent about half of those newcomers. And women using lane ways is major, because that indicates that there is a feeling of safety that wasn't there before. So the transformative potential of everyone using--women, children, men, whoever--using these lane ways as public space, as a way to get around, as somewhere to have a coffee or meet a friend, yeah, it could be radical. The city could be radically transformed.

- Pretty exciting, isn't it?

- Mm-hmm.

- Thank you for coming in and doing this.

- Thank you.

- We'll be right back.

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- [Stuart] Welcome to Conversations That Matter.

- [Alex] Thank you.

- You produce public art. And you're involved in Ackery's Alley. What are some of the considerations that you have to bring in to creating a public space that's gonna survive and also engage?

- There's more technical considerations and experiential considerations when we came up with these ideas. On the technical side we wanna do things that we can pretty much hide so they're not very accessible to the public to vandalize because there's all kinds of people, right?

- Yes.

- So we came up with things that are pretty safe, that'll survive a long time. We look for hardware that is gonna be good out in the outdoors and it's gonna behave the way it has to for a long time. But then from the experiential point of view, there's a lot more considerations in terms of what our intention is and what we wanna do when we create installations. Doing something in the middle of downtown, one of the considerations is to make sure that installation is very inclusive of everybody. We're gonna have a lot of people coming out of the Orpheum Theatre, maybe they went to see a beautiful show, but there's also people who are just eating a slice of pizza around the corner.

- Right, yeah.

- So how do you create something that is gonna appeal to your body and then make everybody feel included and not like, "What is this thing, I don't get it. "This is not for me, right?"

- And "I'm not going down there."

- Exactly. So that's one of the things that we always keep in mind. The other thing that I personally really like to think about is how to create something that is gonna surprise people and has many levels of engagement from the moment that you're a block away you see it to the moment that you walk up to it and then other people are playing with it and then your own interaction with the piece. And then even walking away and the people that you might meet in the process of doing that. So I take all of that into consideration when coming up with ideas.

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- What did you come up with that creates those different levels of engagement, and how do you then get somebody to move from one level to the next? Do you have to make it relatively easy, or is it a little bit of a puzzle? How do you draw them in?

- I think it's very easy and there's a bit of surprise and a bit of when you just see it you don't really know what it is, you kinda want to approach it to understand better, and then once you understand what it is you wanna get in it to experience it right. So the way I look at it is I wanna be able to do something where you're far away, it attracts you. Like what is that thing that I've never seen before? What are they doing, what are those people doing there? Why are they dancing, why are they moving like that? So just your curiosity to solve that problem, like what's going on, the same way that sometimes you're walking around you see they're shooting a movie, it's like, oh, what are they doing? You walk to it, you ask, you wanna see what's happening. Your curiosity wants to bring you in. And once you get there you see that people are actually interacting and they're having fun, something is happening, you'll see lights, you'll hear sounds and then most people will just walk right into it. Some people will just stay on the sidelines until they feel safe enough that they can go and do it. It's thinking about what does it look like from far away, what is it sound like from far away, what does it look like when you're meters away, what does it feel and sound like when you're inside of it?

- You have been involved in public art, interactive displays, for a long time. Why is it important being in an urban environment, especially one like Vancouver where we haven't had much of this experience, why is it important that we introduce it into the landscape?

- I've been doing this for 10 years, and the reason why I started doing this is before that I used to work in media, I worked on websites and design, and I was an associate creative director in an advertising agency, and I felt really that my contribution to the world, to experiences, was really non-existent. And I felt like the world, my environment, needed more places where we could actually enjoy with people. And this is 10 years ago, I started to see how phones and YouTube and Facebook started to consume our lives, and then we're so disconnected from each other. And I felt like I didn't want to be part of that, I wanted to create stuff that would bring people outside and get people connected and talking and still have this social interaction that now, 10 years later, we have lost so much, right?

- [Stuart] True.

- For me, if I can put these type of pieces in the city and entice people to talk to each other or give them excuses to talk to each other in a moment that everybody feels very isolated, that's the kind of work that I want to do. I want to do it all over the city, I want to do it everywhere.

- Well, I think it's fundamentally important because as you pointed out, we're becoming a society where we're finding ways to keep distance from one another and not connect one on one, rather be engaged

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with a device. So I hope that you have many more projects like this in the works, and under way, especially here for the city of Vancouver. Thanks very much for coming in and joining us.

- Thank you.

- We'll be right back.

- [Voiceover] Conversations That Matter is a not-for-profit program made possible thanks to the charitable support of the following and from viewers like you. Please visit ConversationsThatMatter.tv and help us to continue to produce this program.

- This has been a pretty successful launch too, something that is gonna help to transform our downtown. How important is that transformation for the workplace of the future, the living space of the future? Because we're gonna see that continued densification and the changing mix between commercial and residential downtown. How does that make us a more livable city?

- We started, I would call, at the granular level, talking about alleys, so lets move it up to public spaces and how important it is. It's extremely important. I think that as we densify in the downtown area, both daytime and nighttime, people that live here 24/7, we need to have fairly accessible public space. We can't assume that everyone can walk 20 minutes to get to the seawall and do the seawall during a brief amount of time, so we need to have a variety of different public spaces for people of all ages. It's really exciting, there's a new park planned for Richards and Smythe, that's in the book so to speak, the money is there, the parks board's gonna develop it, I was part of the team that was involved in the consultation and the stakeholder consultation. That park is really unique and different than, for example, the one at Cathedral Square. We need a variety of different public spaces to serve different needs. So having many parks, I would say within five to 10 minutes' walk, is pretty critical as we densify in the downtown area.

- Thank you for all the work you've been doing to make this a better city because I love Vancouver and I really admire what you're doing.

- [Charles] Thank you.

- [Stuart] Thanks.

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