

Vancouver arts community feeling sting of real estate 'renovictions'

'These real estate developers don't understand the significance of these spaces,' says a co-founder of Nuzi collective

ZAK VESCERA Updated: June 18, 2019

Stephen Lyons is spending his last full day in the venue he built.

It was called Merge, and it hosted a bit of everything. He points to a wall that used to have a massive purple velvet curtain and a setup for the jazz bands. A side room was the setting for his favourite avant-garde art installation. One of the last exhibits was a "pre-eulogy" for the venue itself.

Merge and its neighbour, Index, are the two latest casualties of Vancouver's struggling independent music scene as high costs and development continue to push them out of town.

The venues, which share an industrial space at 1305 Powell St. on the city's east side, are being "renovicted" this month by Low Tide Properties, which purchased the property last year.

Lyons said he's unsure whether they'll be able to find a new space — let alone afford it.

"It's stirred up the existential question of whether I can afford to keep doing this," he said.

"Underground" venues in Vancouver have long existed as cheap, accessible alternatives for young artists and marginalized communities.

Michael Gordon, a former senior planner at the City of Vancouver, has been chronicling the city's music scene since he was a part of it in the 1980s.

Gordon said the push to develop industrial spaces — like the False Creek, Mount Pleasant and Strathcona areas — has made space for independent artists scarce.

"They really can't afford to be in areas where condos are being sold," he said.



Stephen Lyons is the director of Merge, a jazz club that's being 'renovicted' by Low Tide Properties. *FRANCIS GEORGIAN / PNG*

Strathcona Business Improvement Association executive director Theodora Lamb said the displacement of artists is a sign of Strathcona's challenge: Managing gentrification and higher property values with preserving the neighbourhood's identity.

"The situation is reaching crisis levels," she said. "Smaller tenants like artists and community services can no longer afford to keep their Strathcona roots, and the artist's community is not immune to that.

"It's losing what feeds the community, is what I would describe it as."

An independent SFU study commissioned by the City of Vancouver this year noted the "troubling" disappearance of independent arts spaces.

Community members say a wave of closures has only left a couple spaces left standing, which is why the loss of Index and Merge are particularly painful.

"I think more than any space shutting down, this one is where the community is most affected by it," said Betty Mulat, the co-founder of Nuzi collective.

Nuzi hosts events for Vancouver's black and queer communities. Its first show was hosted at Index, which Mulat said was a "hub" for different music communities in the city.

She said developers should consider the impact that shutting down these spaces has on communities like hers.

"These real estate developers don't understand the significance of these spaces," she said. "These spaces give people purpose. They give people meaning in their lives."

Low Tide Properties did not respond to multiple requests for comment.



lululemon athletica founder and Low Tide Properties owner Chip Wilson, pictured last year. Wilson's name appears on property records for 1305 Powell St. and eight other buildings that Low Tide Properties lists in the Strathcona area. *JASON PAYNE / PNG FILES*

The company, whose website says it aims to invest in “emerging neighbourhoods,” has been rapidly purchasing property in East Vancouver for many years and has a public goal of owning \$1.5 billion in Vancouver real estate by 2026.

Chip Wilson, the founder of lululemon athletica, is the company's owner. His name and the name of David Ferguson, Low Tide's chief investment officer, appears on property records for 1305 Powell St. and eight other buildings that Low Tide lists in the Strathcona area.

Nathan Drillot, part of the team that manages Index, said relations with the company were tense.

“They clearly weren't interested in us being there and they weren't particularly interested in kind or fair business practices,” he said.

Drillot said Low Tide negotiated a lease but later refused to sign it. It suddenly served him notice in February, he said.

Last year, the Red Gate Arts Society was also evicted by Low Tide from its former space at 855 East Hastings St.



Merge and Index share an industrial space at 1305 Powell St. on Vancouver's east side, and are being 'renovicted' by Low Tide Properties. *FRANCIS GEORGIAN / PNG*

In an earlier interview with Postmedia, society director Jim Carrico said Low Tide hiked the rent by 250 per cent prior to eviction, which was also for the purpose of renovation.

Low Tide is a major sponsor of the Vancouver Mural Festival, which has decorated multiple buildings in Strathcona — something Lyons finds ironic.

"His name is now synonymous with renoviction among artists. I'm curious how he feels about that," said Lyons.

But Lyons, who has been hosting independent shows for over 15 years, said the loss of the space is part of a bigger trend of unaffordability in the city.

Lyons said he gets phone calls from artists every day asking if he'll be able to re-establish Merge somewhere else. But he's not sure if he can afford it.

"It's like if you went through a breakup and people called you everyday asking, 'Have you found another girlfriend?' " he said with a laugh. "It's not that helpful."

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