Downtown Vancouver Redevelopment

Webber Building faces uncertain future

Century-old landmark sits in middle of key Waterfront Gateway Properties project

By CALLEY HAIR
Columbia staff writer

A century-old landmark in downtown Vancouver faces an uncertain future due to its location in the center of a public redevelopment project.

The Webber Building, a sturdy brick structure at 600 Columbia St., has a storied history—it was once home to a blacksmith, and then a machine company, before it eventually became an office space.

It also sits on the Waterfront Gateway Properties, a strategic swath of city-owned land that Vancouver leaders view as key to connecting the city’s historic downtown core to its new development along the Columbia River waterfront.

John Colum, the city’s principal planner, told The Columbian that the eventual master planners for the Waterfront Gateway Properties will need to "look at how the building might fit in with a redevelopment scenario, or how it might impede a redevelopment scenario."

The Webber Building will stick around through at least 2022, when a lease on the space expires, Colum said. But right now, it’s unknown whether the Webber Building will remain stand-

Raina Portnoy/ The Columbian

EAGLE CAM: Soaring bird of prey films crumbling Alpine glaciers

Aerial footage shot by a camera attached to an eagle shows a glacier in Western Europe. A white-tailed eagle named Victor will embark upon a series of flights over the Alps this week. Organizers hope his bird’s-eye footage will prompt people to take action on climate change.

Project’s organizers hope high-flying footage will shake climate-change apathy

By CLAIRE PARKER
and JOHN LEICESTER
Associated Press

PARIS — The images will be stunningly beautiful yet also hint of dire future consequences. Filmed with a camera mounted between his majestic wings, they’ll show how a white-tailed eagle named Victor sees the world as help jolt the world out of climate-change apathy and toward swifter action to combat its effects.

His handler hopes that seeing the world as an eagle sees it will also convey viewers of the importance of protecting birds and their environments, especially after a devastating recent report chronicled their decline.

"We hope that once more, people are going to see nature from a totally different perspective and just reconnect to it and realize that wow, it's actually something that is
The Webber Building has a rich history, and has housed a blacksmith, a machine company and office space. This is a view of the west side of the building.

Long history

The building has a rich, if occasionally morbid, history. Joseph Webber and his family ran a blacksmith shop out of the building starting in 1909. When World War I started, Webber and his sons left to work for Stanfield Shipyards, Jolota said.

Once the war ended, Webber returned to his blacksmith business, but with the advent of cars, blacksmiths were struggling. So he sold his family converted their business to a machine shop, WEBER MACHINE WORKS, to remain on the building.

In 1946, Jolota said, Webber wrote a family note: “Getting close to the old shop. Goodbye.” He sat on a workbench and shot himself in the head.

The building’s son continued the family business for several years. It’s since been converted to office space.

Jolota said in an interview with The Columbian that long-term residents still remember the building housed a machine company.

“It was so popular with kids, because if parts of the car would break, they could have a duplicate part made. They’d do it for them right there,” she said. “Older folks still talk about being there and going to buy parts and use these machines and such.”

Though the building is regarded as a place of Vancouver history informally, it’s officially listed as a historic structure; not with the Clark County Historic Preservation Commission or the state registry.

Brad Richardson, chair of the Clark County History Society, said he hopes to get involved with the Waterfront Gateway Properties to preserve the development project in some way.

Richardson said the building is being used by city staff parking. The building’s interior is always somewhat interesting in use, especially if it can be reused for new purposes,” Richardson said. “These historic buildings are irreplaceable in their nature.

The gateway project

The Waterfront Gateway Properties encompass 6.4 acres, mostly owned by the city, directly south of Convention Center, spanning from Grant Street to Columbia Street. In addition to the Waterfront Building, the land is being used for city staff parking.

Victor’s earliest flights were Paris and Bay Khalifa garnered millions of views and organizers hope the hot air balloon will yield powerful images that will inspire disarming gliders impossible to ignore. Travers has witnessed the melting firsthand during scoping trips ahead of Victor’s travels. A German glider that had been packed snow when he first visited last year is now mostly said. He said, “It was stumped.”

The difference over a year was incredible.

Dissipating permitting, which now guns a glacier’s rocks together, can cause them to crumble with potentially devastating consequences.

But Victor’s flights come as Italian authorities are scrambling to respond to fears that part of a large Italian glacier near Mont Blanc is on the verge of collapsing. They warned that falling ice could endanger climbers and people in the Val Ferret area, a popular destination.

At the rate the planet is warming, it’s too late for the Alps glacier. Freedom Conservation Managing Director Ronald Mendal said, “We’re not too late to fight climate change even more broadly. We hope Victor’s popularity will spur viewers into action.”

“We hope that once more, people are going to see narratives are a totally different perspective and just connect to it and realize that we’re actually doing something that is amazing and that we want to do something to preserve,” he said.

Eagle cam

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back over such distances and such vistas, and see how they flew.

“Now how can you convince people to get their heads out of their environment and to show you never show them what they’re doing?”

Weather permitting, the 68-year-old Victor will set off today. His plans include a flight over the Swiss mountain Pat Corva, which has a camera on his back using a GPS to track his progress. He’ll also make flights over Austria and Italy before ending his tour in France.

A colleague will release Victor from the top of each peak. During each flight, the eagle will fly 3.1 miles — and descend 5,000 to 1,000 feet — in search of Travers’ below.

“Don’t have a remote control for it. So if he doesn’t see me and decides not to come anywhere, there goes anywhere, there goes anywhere,” said Travers.

“Why is this.”

That’s why the flights are weather-dependent. Victor’s vision is obscured by clouds, “he won’t come,” said Travers.

Carrying a camera does slow Victor down.

It’s like being put on a windshield in your car. You don’t go as fast and you use more energy in typical soaring.

But in the windows, he doesn’t see his back and it means a greater effort from him.”

The Webber Building has a rich history, and has housed a blacksmith, a machine company and office space. This is a view of the west side of the building.

the Waterfront Building faces an uncertain future.

In the 1990s, the city was building to build a convention center. The original plans would have required the structure demolition. Vancouver’s development director announced in 1995 that the city would be able to draw around it to construct what’s now the Hilton Vancouver.

Six years later, the city bought the building so it would eventually have space to expand the convention center. It leased the property to Kramer Gehle & Associates, a structural engineering firm, who remains in the building today.

Decades before the convention center saga, the building had barely survived demolition, Jolota said.

“We tore so much down, we had us renovate it. It’s basically just tore everything down. It’s covered with 40, 50 acres. Just lived everything to the ground.

There were a few exceptions, she added — the Webber Building, as well as the Slouer House in the southeast corner of Esther Short Park.

“There’s a lot going for a parking lot that’s left of that. That the shipyard’s gone, that’s still gone, it’s our machine company. And that good old (the building),” Jolota said. “I’d love to see it preserved.”

Chad Elder, the city’s community and economic development director, said a September community workshop that he hopes the property can transform into a site that Vancouver residents and tourists will want to visit.

In that workshop, the Vancouver City Council reviewed their goals for the area: they hope the area’s development will result in a brand new development district that connects other key downtown area.

Active, urban, inviting and mixed-use with cross-site pedestrian access, according to the project statement.

The city council may also decide to pass the project to the City Center Redevelopment Authority, a body that steers major development efforts in downtown Vancouver. The CCRA would manage the planning and development of the Waterfront Gateway Properties, whereas the city council retaining final approval of any developments.

Based on a tentative timeline for the property’s redevelopment, the city hopes to complete visioning workshops by the end of the year. The developer in the first half of 2022 is expected to master development package in the first half of 2021.

Vancouver is accepting public feedback on the Waterfront Gateway Project through an online portal at beavertonvac.org/waterfrontgateway.

After that, the city will submit a proposal directly to the state to be evaluated.

Still standing

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