

## 'Sophisticated' Vancouver losing piece of art to Calgary

### Upside-down church changes cities thanks to our myopic park board

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Let's re-christen the Vancouver park board with the name that really fits: A device for rooting out interesting public art.

In one of the more notable, myopic and politically correct blunders in memory, the park board has managed to lose an internationally recognized piece of public art. The upside-down church, known as Device For Rooting Out Evil, is going to Calgary.

It's always been the conceit of Vancouver that we're the truly sophisticated city in the West, more with it than the supposed roughnecks, rednecks and Bible-thumpers back in Alberta. But Cowtown has just shown us it has better taste and a more mature, more worldly conception of public art.

Calgary's major museum, the amazingly well-curated Glenbow, is taking the upside-down church off our hands. Jeffrey Spalding, who runs the museum in Calgary's downtown, wants to make the oil-patch city a leading centre for the arts in the West. He knew a good thing when he saw it.

Here, we -- or at least the people on the park board -- just didn't get it.

The upside-down church, balanced precariously on the grass on its steeple, was viewed as blasphemous by a small group of people.

An even smaller group of condo owners in Coal Harbour thought the six-metre sculpture blocked their view.

The seven-member Park Board, thinking even smaller -- and oh-so-very PC just as the November civic elections approach -- voted unanimously for the stainless-steel church's removal from the park. They never bothered to find another spot to exhibit it.

Beyond the mountains, however, others see the piece as a major work of public art. Perhaps even a contemporary masterpiece. They might be right.

Its creator is Dennis Oppenheim, whose work is now being collected by some of the world's great institutions. London's Tate Museum and New York's Metropolitan Museum of Art and the Museum of Modern Art are all buying up Oppenheim's pieces.

It's debatable if Device to Root Out Evil was Oppenheim's best work. But unquestionably it is in the top tier.

It does what good art is supposed to do -- it makes you think, stirs emotion, sparks debate and is simply impossible for the eye to miss.

Yes, for some Device to Root Out Evil is an unsettling symbol of the church and religion being turned upside down in contemporary society. One collector I know called it a church going to hell and didn't like it.

Others, though, find it whimsical, evoking the spinning buildings caught in the fantastical tornado in *The Wizard of Oz*. Personally, I think it looks like the church's steeple is being used like a gardening tool to root out weeds deep under the grass. I find it ironic and iconic.

But the Vancouver park board doesn't seem to want public art to stir the mind or soul to such a degree. In their damning report the park board staff reported "public response to the work has been mixed, with a greater proportion of the response being negative."

So what? I thought that was what art was supposed to do. You know, get a response. Create a sensation. I guess not in Vancouver.

So our upside-down church is history. After standing for 18 months on the waterfront, it'll be taken down by the end of the week and go to the windswept prairie. Maybe for good.

Who knows what the park board will deem worthy of putting up in its place. Maybe a coffee kiosk. Perhaps something safe like another totem pole. Whatever it is, I wouldn't count on it filling the vacuum of what was probably our city's greatest piece of outdoor public art.

"It's a major loss for the city," said John Bromley, a representative of the Benefic Foundation, which bought the piece and leased it to the city.

"This was never a money-making deal," Bromley said. "We hope a major loss of this magnitude will stimulate a major debate of public art policy in Vancouver. Hopefully at some point it can come home."

There is an important lesson from this embarrassment, though, as we begin to build our new \$400-million art gallery, not to mention public art projects associated with the 2010 Olympics: Keep the people who make up the Device for



CREDIT: Bill Keay, Vancouver Sun Files  
Raven spirit dance is practised at the upside-down church. The church will soon no longer be a part of the Vancouver landscape.

Rooting Out Interesting Public Art -- a.k.a. the Vancouver park board -- far away from the collection. After this debacle, they need to stick to pruning our parks not picking our art.

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