

Gastown Opportunities & Constraints



GASTOWN PUBLIC SPACES PLAN

DESIGN WORKSHOP SUMMARY

Summary prepared by the City's design consultant team:
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Gastown Public Spaces Design Workshop Summary

Two design workshops for the Gastown Public Spaces Plan brought together people with diverse experiences and interests to explore design approaches to pedestrianizing Water Street and improvements to Gastown’s network of public spaces. These approaches will be shared with the public for feedback in spring 2025 through a series of open houses and public survey.

The workshops were co-hosted by the City of Vancouver and the City’s design consultant team on:

- Tuesday, July 30 from 5:30 to 9:30 pm
- Thursday, August 1 from 9:00 am to 12:30 pm

Attendees represented a range of interests and associations with Gastown, including individual business owners and/or property owners, individuals who work or live in Gastown, representatives of civic advisory committees and social service agencies, and other individuals who visit the area or are interested in it.

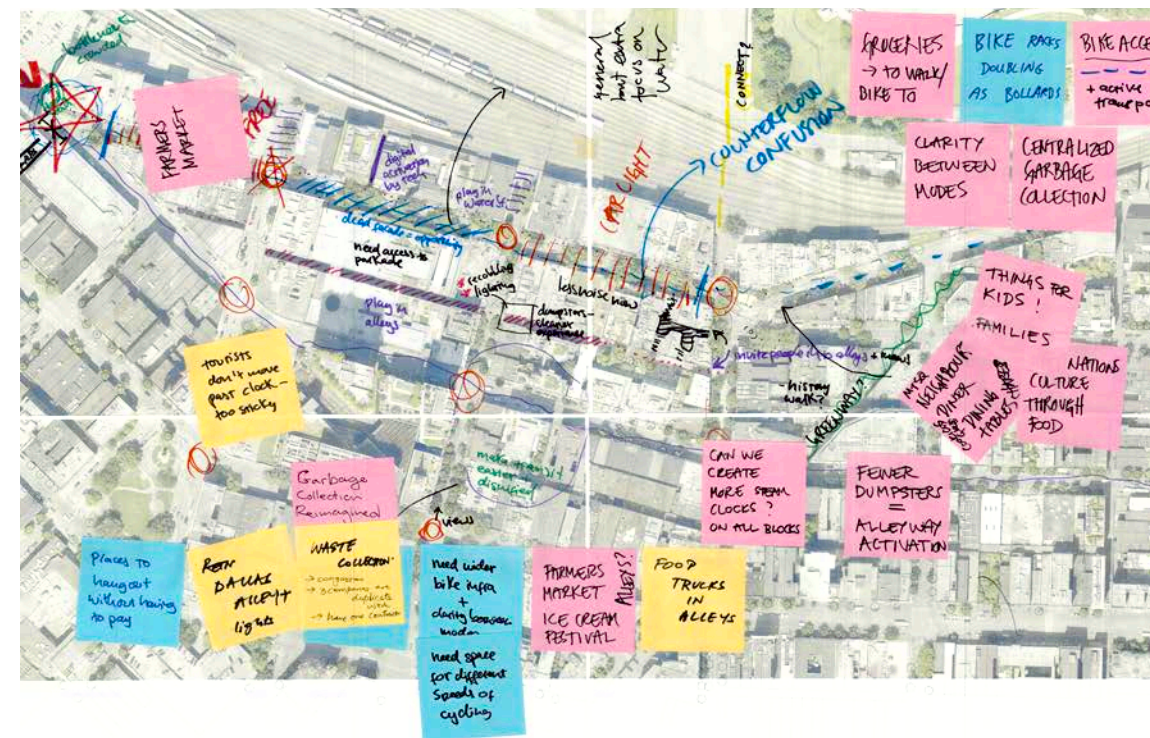
The workshops began with a welcome and introductions by the City’s project manager. The City and consultants presented the context and global research into what makes a successful pedestrian-focused street.

Workshop participants then worked at several breakout tables, each table led by a facilitator and supported by a note-taker. City staff also participated and listened to the discussions. The following is a summary of the outcomes and learnings from these breakout sessions. This feedback will inform the concepts developed for Water Street and the surrounding street network, and shared with the public in 2025.

2 workshops
70 participants

- 27 Gastown business owners and/or property owners
- 26 members of the public including those who work or live in Gastown
- 17 representatives of civic advisory committees and social service agencies

The design workshops were held in Gastown. Gastown is situated on the unceded traditional territories of the xʷməθkʷəy̓əm (Musqueam), Sḵw̱x̱wú7mesh (Squamish) and səliłwətał (Tsleil-Waututh). Local Nations have stewarded these lands since time immemorial.



Some drawings and maps from the workshops have been highlighted throughout this summary.

Breakout Session 1: Explore a People-First Water Street including the Western Gateway and Maple Tree Square

Ice-breaker exercise: Name your favourite pedestrian-friendly street or public space

- 8th Avenue Mall (Calgary)
- Disneyland (California)
- University Village (Seattle)
- Soho (London) streets and public spaces
- Hong Kong rain shelters
- Distillery District (Toronto)
- King's Cross (London)
- Rotterdam public spaces
- Il Campo (Siena)
- Copenhagen streets and public spaces
- Madrid streets and public spaces
- Amsterdam streets and public spaces
- Revichy Street (Budapest)
- Cambridge (Massachusetts)



Exercise 1: Confirming what we heard in past engagement on opportunities and constraints for Water Street and its two bookend Gateway spaces (Western Gateway and Maple Tree Square).

What people love about Gastown today:

- Unique heritage feel and historic character
- Feels local, specific to this place
- Homogeneity/uniformity/continuity in the architecture and streetscape that visually cue you're in Gastown
- Cohesion of colours in branding, signage, public art, street furniture
- Appearance of facades
- Original sidewalk paving/bricks
- Lighting at night
- The concentration of places to dine out, shop, grab coffee/drink, sit at an outdoor patio (specifically without cars going by)
- Opportunities to meet and hang out with friends
- Walkable/Transit connections between work, home, and errands
- Heritage and storytelling aspect
- Live music and events
- Pedestrianized Water Street (during summer pilot)
- Gastown's unique character e.g. paving, history, unique feel and the access to things to do (restaurants, proximity to arenas)
- The diversity of the people of Gastown, and the sense of potential for what it can become

What people noted as their biggest concerns or the main barriers to being in and moving around Gastown today:

- Lack of accessibility for people of all abilities
- Lack of cycling infrastructure
- Concerns about safety and cleanliness
- Increase in unpredictable behavior relating to open drug use
- Concerns with human and animal waste
- Getting to and from transit safely
- Waste bins in alleys/lanes
- Concerns about conflicts between people driving, walking and cycling
- Centralized urban poverty and unhoused people
- Poor living conditions in area Single Room Occupancy buildings (SROs) and lack of outdoor gathering/green spaces, which creates congestion on the street
- Economic impacts of the summer pedestrianization pilot on businesses (some business owners/operators reported declines in business during the summer pedestrianization pilot)

- Mitigating the impacts of construction
- Poor connection from Convention Centre
- No protected bike lanes in Water Street/Gastown
- Making laneways safer with increased car use
- Activating vacant lot (Winters Hotel site)
- Concern for lack of history being celebrated
- Lack of public washrooms
- Lack of intentionality in furniture placement and design
- Unintended use of furniture by individuals experiencing homelessness
- Mixed impacts of business modifications during summer pedestrianization pilot, with some food businesses experiencing a decline in customers and others seeing an increase
- Absence of significant local markets, events or attractions to engage both locals and tourists inclusively
- Limited vehicle turning radius near the Steam Clock is causing pedestrians to create congestion on the narrow sidewalks (during Summer 2024 Pilot)
- Confusing vehicle circulation, challenging drop off and pick up locations
- Poor physical condition of the public realm
- The need to draw people further into Gastown beyond the Steam Clock
- Participating in the public realm is hindered by red tape (i.e. City regulations, permit processes)

What people want to see in Gastown tomorrow:

- Increased sense of public safety as a priority
- Enhanced cleanliness as a priority
- Improved access for people with mobility limitations
- Gateways that welcome people into Gastown in an intuitive way
- Expression of local Nations' histories and cultures*
- Ensuring access to businesses for patrons and for goods (loading, delivery)
- Winter programming
- Weather protection strategies to ensure public spaces are usable year-round
- Integrate colour and thematic elements to establish a distinctive identity for Gastown
- Incorporate Indigenous art and culture through sculptures, murals
- Dedicated bicycle lanes
- Increase green space: trees and greenery are a priority
- Historic/Site-specific stories could be better celebrated/more visible
- Leverage the presence of the tech sector e.g. digital navigation/tours, QR codes for signage
- Encourage the film industry
- Important to focus not just on tourists: bring in the locals
- More community spaces and amenities for unhoused people
- Increased access to clean public washrooms

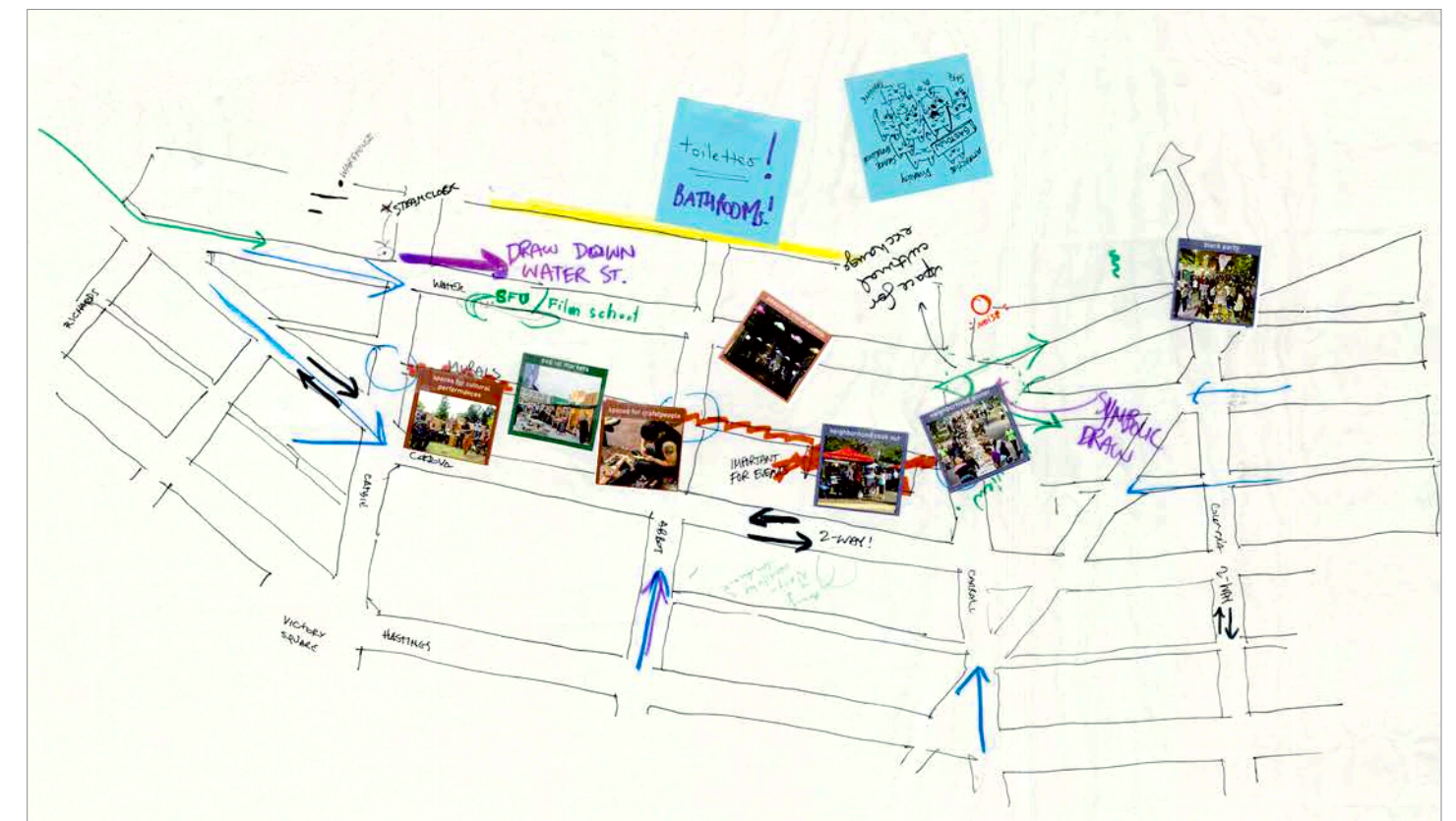
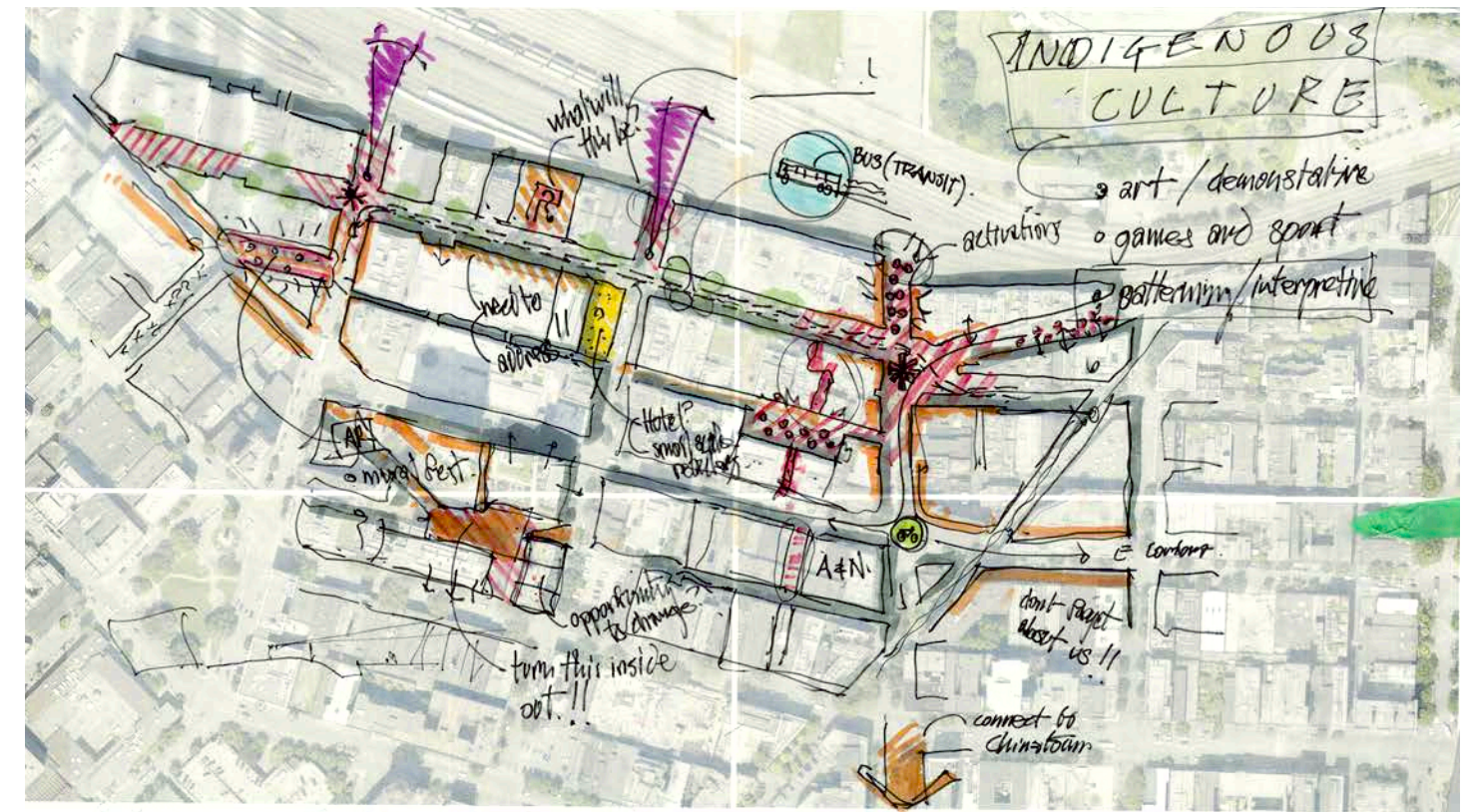
- Enhance indoor-outdoor connections e.g. patio extensions that add to the public realm
- Remove patio liquor service fencing/barrier restrictions
- Activate 'dead zones' along Water Street e.g. parkade and film school street frontage
- Flexibility for vehicle drop-off/pick-up, e.g. furniture store purchases, accessibility
- Parking improvements e.g. visibility/wayfinding, safety and cleanliness of parkade
- Visibility for all – tell the story of all cultures and nations that helped build Gastown
- Smaller, more affordable stores serving local needs (like Hastings Sunrise neighbourhoods)
- Ways to attract locals into Gastown beyond the two-month tourist season
- Getting by Hastings Street safely
- More programming of the public realm
- Better amenities for comfort
- Better lighting
- A cleaner and more beautiful public realm
- A shift in how ways of moving through the district are prioritized in Gastown, especially on Water Street.
- A district that is inviting for everyone and gives more visibility to local Nations*
- A district that is planned for the long term e.g. more durable materials, sustaining tenants
- A desire for Gastown to be inclusive of all its residents, and to provide more dignified public space experiences for everyone, not just on Water Street and Maple Tree Square, but across the neighborhood and the east side
- More seating and community spaces e.g. gardens
- A desire to be part of the Gastown/Water Street/ Maple Tree Square transformation process, and play an active role in activation, including curation, funding, implementation and operation
- A (mostly) car-free Water Street that is greener, cleaner, and better connects the district, with special attention to the inactive centre block of Water Street
- The western and eastern bookends (Maple Tree Square, Western Gateway) should be bold 'Gateways' with high quality lighting
- Maple Tree Square can also be a place for live music and for people lingering, not just for restaurant patrons
- Identify Alexander Street (especially at Columbia Street) as a focus area for a public space for locals
- Gastown as more sustainable, inclusive, and a re-balancing of transportation modes
- Community members said that they want Gastown to be bolder, which includes more programming, better amenities for comfort, and a cleaner, more beautiful public realm

**This will be determined through the ongoing partnership with xʷməθkʷəy̓əm ([Musqueam](#)), Sk̓wx̓wú7mesh ([Squamish](#)), and səlilwataʔ ([Tsleil-Waututh](#)) nations.*

Exercise 2: Based on the previous exercise, what are your top priorities (uses, activities, experiences) for this project to deliver for Water Street? What does 'bold pedestrianization' of Water Street and Maple Tree Square mean to you?

- Need to consider the unique geographical and social context of Water Street and Gastown
- Strong interest in increasing number of patios and creating cohesive patio guidelines to activate street and avoid the 'walls' (fence barriers) that are currently being installed
- Water Street is already pedestrian friendly with wide sidewalks, and more attention should be given to other areas of the neighbourhood
- Consider allowing some vehicular traffic on Water Street so that people who feel unsafe can be picked up/dropped off by public transit, taxis, car-shares near their door
- Extend the summer pilot project duration into winter and be deliberate with programming and design elements
- Enhance local Nations presence through arts and crafts*, and digital and interactive art
- Remove large patio barriers and implement improved standards to create a more aesthetically pleasing and functional spatial arrangement
- Clarify vehicle circulation for businesses, visitors and tourists through signage, design, and better communication
- Conduct research and studies on business success and develop initiatives to support businesses during downturns
- Offer programs, markets, and live festivals
- Introduce flexibility in the regulations governing liquor service permits
- Enhance methods for communicating events and collaborations in Gastown to the public
- Enhance security measures or other forms of oversight to ensure the safety of employees and visitors in Gastown while addressing concerns about public space misuse
- Increase public washrooms
- 2-way Cordova if Water Street is closed to vehicles
- Program more events and buskers, but keep noise regulated
- Accommodate a range of programming for large and small events, and make scheduling clear and accessible to all
- Create mystery and 'unusual' activations
- Increase site mobility (for those with mobility challenges)
- Storytelling: it's called Water Street – where is the water?

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Breakout Session 2: Looking at Gastown as a district, how can we complement Water Street and Maple Tree Square, to deliver a more comprehensive, equitable and cohesive public realm across Gastown?

Exercise 1: Looking at the precedent images, think about similar experiences that you would like to have in Gastown and where they could be. Think about possible barriers to achieving these and consider how we might overcome them with improved public realm design or other solutions (e.g. operational, logistical, City policies).

- Make it easier for businesses to get City licenses for special events, outdoor uses, etc.
- Remove patio liquor service fencing/barrier restrictions
- Need to consider the unique context of Gastown (historical, geographical and social)
- Consider pedestrian and cycling connections along North-South Streets (Carrall and/or Abbott) to connect to stadiums, Chinatown, Downtown East Side, False Creek
- Activate alleys through events, programming, business entrances, greenery
- Add more trees throughout neighbourhood to improve walking experience
- Need to do everything we can to encourage key businesses to stay in the neighbourhood through improved safety and cleanliness and drawing locals to the area

Exercise 2: Identify specific places to realize public realm design opportunities beyond Water Street/Maple Tree Square. Areas Beyond Water Street and Maple Tree Square include:

- North-South Streets (Cambie, Abbott, Carroll, Columbia)
- Powell/Alexander streets
- Cordova Street
- Lanes/Alleys (e.g. Blood Alley, Water Street north-side lane), Mews, 'hidden' spaces,
- Former railway ROW (diagonal corridor)

Cordova Street:

- Convert Cordova Street to two lanes to lower traffic speeds and support a car-light Water Street
- Encourage cautious driving and cycling by implementing treatments like raised crosswalks and curb extensions along Cordova Street
- Greening Cordova Street
- Improve pedestrian accessibility
- Enhance corners and curbs (refer to Sydney and Houston precedents)
- Add warm lighting
- Convert to two-way traffic if Water Street is closed to commuter traffic

Water Street north-side lane (beside rail yard):

- Highlight the scenic water/mountain views and historic significance of the old shoreline
- Modify its current use to enhance car accessibility for drop-off and pick-up
- Convert it into a bike lane connecting Science World to Coal Harbour
- Connect up to the Waterfront Station parking lot to take advantage of the views
- Incorporate graffiti and murals that support Indigenous and local artists, creating a popular hub for photography
- Evaluate potential modifications to the current use of this lane
- Create raised viewpoints (across Burrard Inlet)
- Create pop-up spaces/services along this lane
- Activate the lane by incorporating storytelling through local Nations art*
- Construct an elevated structure over the rail tracks to utilize wasted spaces

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Alexander Street:

- Explore Alexander Street (especially at Columbia Street) as a focus area for a public space for locals
- Design Alexander Street as a slow street (currently receiving traffic from Powell Street closure)
- Good place for daytime activation
- Design Alexander/Columbia intersection as an opportunity for a local public space
- Focus on locals, don't displace them
- Add seating and more greenery
- Alexander Street should be a slow, green, local street
- Crosswalks and curb

Alleys/Lanes:

- Enhance land use policies to facilitate more businesses opening up to lanes, addressing factors such as pest control that may currently limit opportunities
- Enhance safety measures in lanes to ensure visitors feel secure and welcome
- Improve lighting
- Re-evaluate waste management strategy in lanes to remove dumpsters, activate and revitalize neglected spaces
- Need to address waste management and sanitation solutions: cosmetic changes won't suffice
- Balance the trade-off between alleys serving as back-of-house services and placemaking
- Activate alleys through events, programming, business entrances, greenery
- Activation in Alleys/Lanes once centralized garbage collection makes this possible: centralized waste collection and management is a key factor
- Concern of gentrification driving people out
- Trounce Alley needs attention
- Alleys/Lanes that take you somewhere: create loops/through-fares (not dead ends)
- Complete reactivation of Blood Alley Square

North-South Streets (Cambie, Abbott, Carroll, Columbia):

- Consider implementing an attractive paving pattern that extends from north-south streets into Gastown. The pavement should be universally accessible, durable, and narratively engaging
- Address privately owned spaces at the edges to support the presence of local artists, business owners, and other community members
- Consider pedestrian and cycling connections along North-South Streets (Carrall and Abbott) to connect to stadiums, Chinatown, Downtown Eastside, False Creek
- Employ consistent materials, such as special paving and wood, on the North-South streets to establish a cohesive aesthetic in Gastown, while also providing each street with a distinctive identity
- Incorporate innovative wayfinding strategies, such as signage and colour, to encourage visits to Water Street from the south

Carrall Street:

- More green
- Enhance connection to sports arenas
- Potential as connector/entry to Water Street
- Care for and enforce existing bike lane
- Opportunity for green space and viewing area at the dead end of street
- Powell at Carrall there is a need for access for cars and parking for businesses

Abbott Street:

- Enhance tree canopy to draw people in to Gastown

Other Streets/Spaces:

- Small, medium and large spaces: a variety of experiences/draws as one moves through Gastown
- Convert the Canadian Pacific Railway right-of-way into a linear public space, e.g. history or nature walk (Note: Opening the CPR ROW is not in scope of the Gastown Public Spaces Plan and any changes would involve several parties including private landowners.)
- Create a pedestrian connection to Crab Park: Recognize this as an important local amenity
- Utilize street along the waterfront (Note: this road is owned by Port of Vancouver)
- Bridge over the train tracks
- Add more trees throughout Gastown to improve walking experience
- Do everything possible to encourage businesses to stay in the neighbourhood through improved safety and cleanliness and by drawing locals into the area

Overall:

- A general sense of discomfort / lack of safety keeps people from walking down side streets and into Gastown
- More/better lighting needed on side streets to draw people into the neighborhood
- Need better branding/advertising of the neighborhood – draw people's attention with low-cost 'breadcrumbs' that draw people in; Gastown is not just for tourists
- Need shade and greening in general for comfort
- Activate these other streets and think about activities and events to attract locals as a top priority
- Improve bike infrastructure across Gastown
- Gentrification must be carefully managed and displacement of locals avoided
- Needs of all economic groups should be accounted for and more inclusive initiatives should be considered in design to create equitable communities
- Green space on overpass (across rail tracks)
- Pop-up markets on Powell, Carrall and Alexander streets
- Pedestrianize Carrall Street, with room for deliveries
- Temporary art installations
- Enhance connection (materials, paving, etc.) all the way to Main Street from Water Street
- Draw people from Maple Tree Square to businesses on Powell Street
- Promoting the Fire Hall Theatre and Police Museum could help draw people to the east
- Use lighting, greening and branding as strategies to draw people in to Gastown

Conclusion

The workshops facilitated a broad conversation among diverse participants who experience Gastown in various ways. Despite their different interactions with the area, they shared several mutual concerns about safety, cleanliness, access, and Gastown's physical identity. While some supported a car-free Water Street, others expressed concerns about this, and believed that a car-light Water Street or temporal vehicle restrictions would better support business operations.

Participants emphasized that Gastown should be approached holistically, with access to Water Street being as important as the street design itself. Many noted it is crucial to ensure that adjacent streets are equally inviting, safe, and active.

Some business owners called for more flexible City policies/permitting processes regarding spatial arrangements (e.g. relaxing patio barrier restrictions) and event hosting. They also stressed the need for improved marketing of Gastown to locals through frequent programming of public spaces. It was emphasized that Vancouverites should always expect something happening in Gastown throughout all seasons.

This feedback from workshop participants will be used to develop concepts for Water Street and the surrounding areas by the consultant team.

