

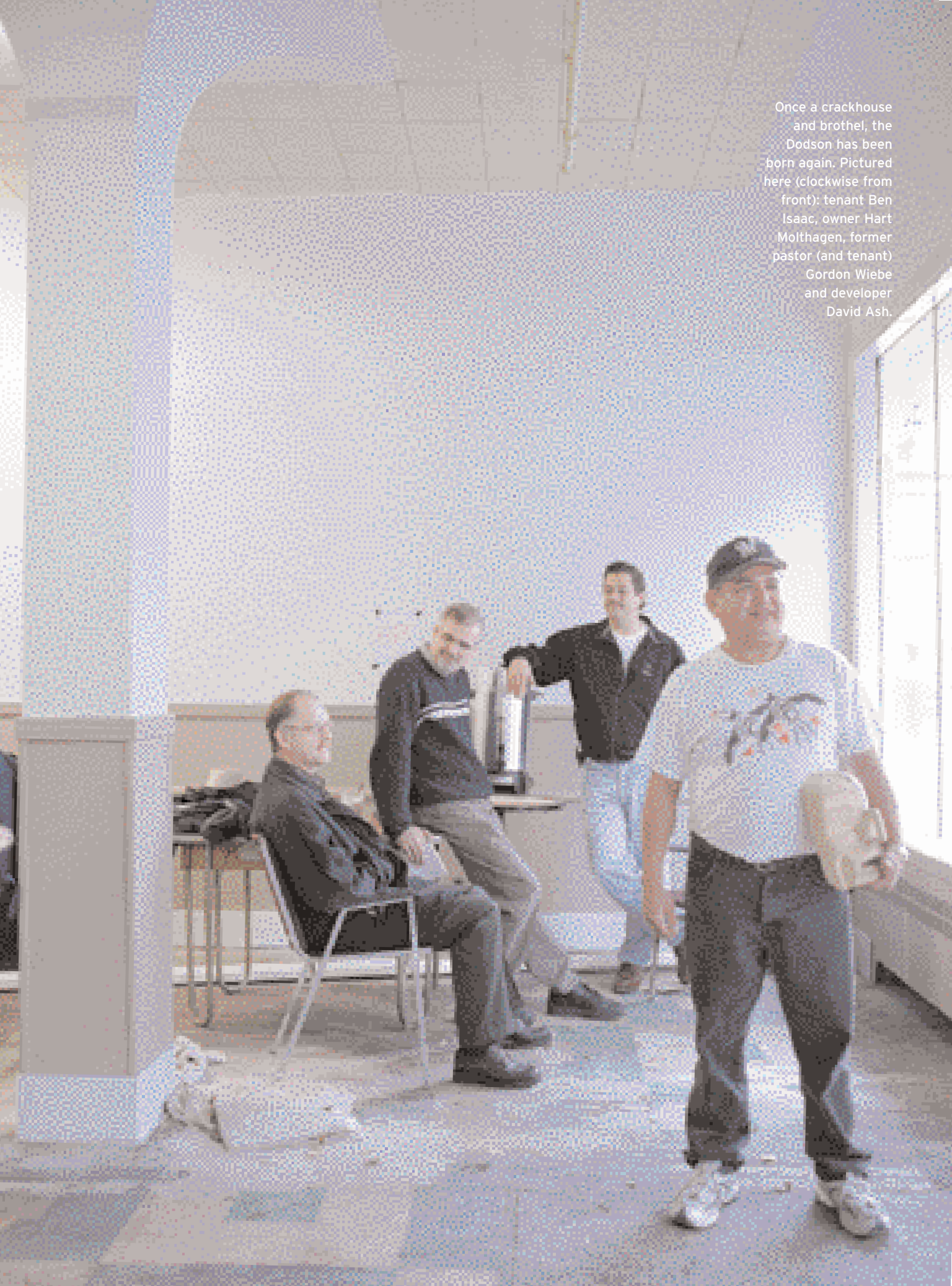


FROM THE OUTSIDE it looks like any of the 125 single-room occupancy hotels dotting the Downtown Eastside. But inside the Dodson, a very revolutionary approach to housing the poor is being tested—with residents, not bureaucrats, running the show.

# THE POWER of Many

By MARCIE GOOD  
Photographs By PAUL JOSEPH

Once a crackhouse and brothel, the Dodson has been born again. Pictured here (clockwise from front): tenant Ben Isaac, owner Hart Molthagen, former pastor (and tenant) Gordon Wiebe and developer David Ash.



# T

he lobby of the Dodson Hotel and Pub at 25 East Hastings shows evidence of a long and complicated past. The aged, tiled flooring is worn, revealing even older floor boards. Two doors on opposite walls are labeled with faded words from another era: “Ladies Parlour” and “Mens Parlour.” The chairs grouped by the window are someone else’s cast-offs and the elevator creaks—but there are other signs here, and they seem more important.

Construction workers are busy building a new front desk, and a secure door with a buzzer system has recently been installed. A neat little notice is posted on the wall behind the coffee percolator: “Please take only two pieces of toast. That way everyone can have some.” Above the hammering and the conversation of people coming and going, the sounds of someone playing the piano float in from the pub.

The first place Gordon Wiebe takes me is the basement, because, he tells me, the foundation is integral. It’s largely empty now; three truckloads of trash have been cleared out. “I’m sure someone would want to tear this down and gentrify it,” he says, pointing to the dirty brick walls. He shows

me one of the keg lines running up through the ceiling that had been dripping beer on the electrical box. “These are some of the nightmares we had to deal with.”

Wiebe, in his pressed Columbia shirt and glasses, looks out of place in a single-room occupancy hotel in the heart of the Downtown Eastside. But the former pastor of a Langley Pentecostal church actually lives here, with his wife. He and I emerge from the dark basement, moving up the staircases and through the newly lit halls, past a red-haired woman carrying a bucket and mop. He points out doorways battered from being kicked in so many times. “Haven’t we replaced your door yet?” he says to a female tenant. “What’s wrong with us?”

UNTIL IT WAS BOUGHT by well-intentioned real estate developers in April, the Dodson was not free from the problems of many nearby rooming houses: crime, poor—if not abusive—management, and living conditions that most of us would consider deplorable. Worthy organizations such as the Portland Hotel Society have done their best, but the SROs are still a civic crisis zone. (In August the city closed the Marr Hotel on Powell and has been active on SRO issues: they’ve passed a bylaw forcing developers to pony up \$5,000 per room they convert into non-low-rent use, and have a one-for-one replacement policy in place.) And yet the 125 Downtown Eastside hotels, with about 5,093 rooms between them, provide something desperately needed by residents of Canada’s poorest neighbourhood: a roof. The Dodson is an attempt to give them more than that.

Hart Molthagen walks briskly

down the sidewalk just a block away, past a woman wailing for a chocolate bar. “I’m sorry, no,” he says to her. We go into Blake’s, a busy Gastown coffee shop with walls of reclaimed orange brick.

As a developer, Molthagen’s most notable previous project was O’Doul’s Hotel and Restaurant on Robson, which he and members of his family sold in 1989. He’s also involved in the First Baptist Church on Burrard, and while he’s wary of being labeled a Christian, it’s certainly no secret. “Why would a successful businessman like I was all at once get into the Downtown Eastside rooming houses and not raise the rates? I mean everybody knows,” he says with a laugh. “But you’ve got to come journey with me to find out why.”

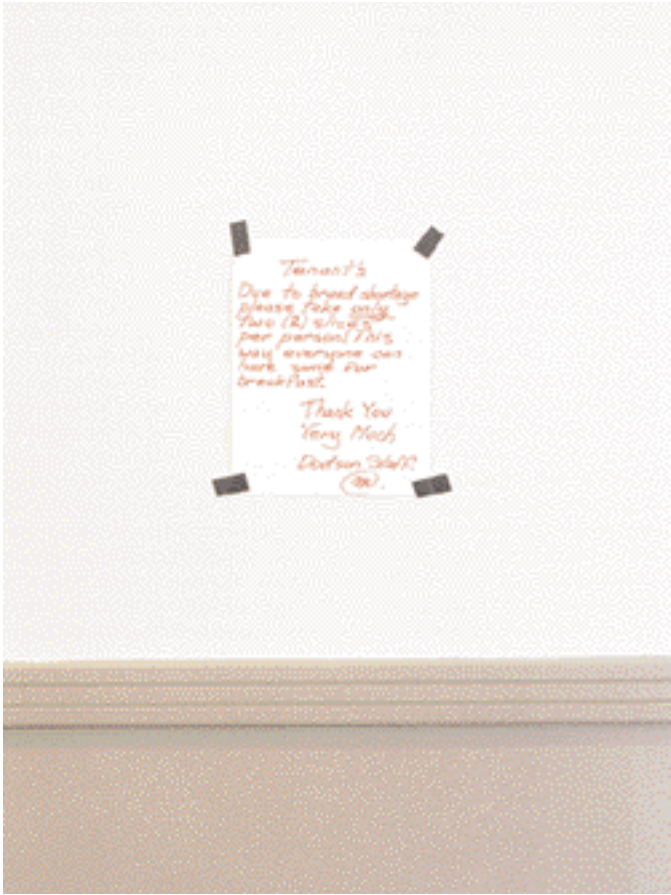
FOR MOST of his career, Molthagen was motivated by the buying of land and the design and construction of a building. After that was done, he liked to sell out and move on.

But the Jubilee Rooms was the start of something different, the place where Molthagen’s latest journey began. In September 2000, Molthagen bought two side-by-side hotels at 235 Main Street. The city was about to close them; one was known as a crackhouse, the other a brothel.

He bought them for \$1.15 million and put another \$500,000 into renovations, painting, lights, new beds and security cameras. As much as possible he hired tenants to do the work, and many of his staff were recent graduates of recovery programs. His plan was to provide safe, clean, affordable and supportive housing, and after six



Outside the Dodson Hotel and Pub at Main and Hastings. Opposite page (clockwise from top left): house rules, posted in the lobby; three-month resident Rodney, riding the elevator; without phones, the Dodson uses an old mail sorter for communications; Rodney lends a hand to hotel renovations.





This month from  
DR. ALASTAIR CARRUTHERS

I FINISHED THE COLUMN two months ago talking about how BOTOX is a choice - you can choose to have it, or not to have it. I am often asked questions which go even further back in the decision making process. Many individuals are concerned about cosmetic procedures. They are concerned about the safety, results and about the value. They are also concerned about being considered "vain".

I think the concept of maintenance is very important in the area of cosmetic procedures. In other words, we start out by maintaining our skin by regular care and in particular by sun avoidance, sun protection and sunscreens. Secondly, we will add a topical such as topical Vitamin A acid (Retin A and similar products) and other topical applications which are of less proven value. Daily maintenance will make a major difference over a life time! We then move on from there to procedures which may be performed two or three times a year such as BOTOX or filling agents. In this category we would also now put the photo rejuvenation procedures which can reduce the appearance of sun damage and also get rid of some early cancers.

It's only when we have considered, or are already doing these procedures, that we start thinking about other things which may only have to be done once in a life time. These would include surgical procedures such as face lift, brow lift, eyelid lift and liposuction etc.

I think it is important for individuals to be aware of this kind of progression in our thinking and, in particular, to be aware of the importance of maintenance, but maintenance in conjunction with other procedures. In this way we can keep people looking as young as they feel!

ALASTAIR CARRUTHERS, FRCPC



months he felt that he'd largely succeeded.

Then one day in May 2002 he got a call from the Jubilee's building manager. Someone was at the door claiming he was a pastor from Langley and he wanted a room. In this neighbourhood that story didn't add up, so the staff referred him to the boss. Soon Molthagen was talking to Gordon Wiebe. "I laughed my head off because it sounded so fishy," Molthagen recalls. "But after a while I realized this guy was the real thing. Basically what sold me on it was that he said 'I want to live here and get to know the community before I serve the community.' So he moved into the building."

After 25 years working for the Pentecostal Assemblies of Canada as an advocate in prisons and inner cities, and as a mis-

sionary in east Africa, Wiebe had quit his job and decided to work outside the church context. He was amazed by what he saw happening at the Jubilee and how much it connected with his current thinking.

When he knocked on the Jubilee's door, Wiebe was reading Steven Johnson's *Emergence: The Connected Lives of Ants, Brains, Cities and Software*, which describes how self-organizing systems work. Connecting research from many fields, Johnson's 2001 book examines similarities between ant colonies, slime moulds and computer systems that operate using simple-minded components that somehow add up to a greater whole. Ants, for example, live only a year, and carry and convey only tiny units of information. So how can an anthill span 15

Grady, a two-and-a-half month resident, has been hired to lay brass strips on the stairs. Since Hart Molthagen bought the hotel, over \$500,000 has been sunk into renovations.

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years and be a far more complex environment as it advances? While we are conditioned to look for a master planned, top-down structure, a colony evolves from the ground up.

Wiebe became fascinated by the idea that the Downtown Eastside community could organize itself in a similar manner. He saw top-down solutions that created havoc, such as a welfare system that distributes cheques to everyone on the same day. At the Jubilee, there were bottom-up ideas that worked, like a breakfast program started by a tenant. Because Molthagen had no idea how to run a rooming house, he let staff and tenants make the decisions.

When I ask Molthagen if emergence theory makes sense to him, he laughs. "Not in the way it does to Gordon," he says. "The imagery that I can understand is that people left to their own, with just a little bit of guidance, will probably do the right thing and will probably do it in a more innovative and exciting way than I would, with my suburban mindset."

So Wiebe began working with Molthagen, first at the Jubilee and now at the Dodson. Although rumours circulated in the community that he was a policeman or a "religious freak," he prefers to describe himself as "retired." Is he the manager of the Dodson? "If you call me a manager," says Wiebe, "you can throw the whole notion of emergent modelling out the window."

EARLY THIS YEAR, when Molthagen decided it was time for another building, he didn't have the money so he did something else he wasn't used to: he took a risk. The Dodson was up for sale, and he secured it under contract. He was planning to borrow the entire \$1.5 million but before the sale closed, he got another phone call. This time it was developer David Ash on the line, who had heard of the building and wanted to see it. Later he told Molthagen he would put up the cash if they could work together. After some persuasion, Molthagen agreed.

These days the Jubilee is financially viable, meaning that it covers its mortgage payments. Molthagen expects a return after 15 years, and he's willing to show the financial statements to other developers who are interested. The model currently works, with entry-level staff wages and a relatively low building price—but he warns of pressure on those prices from new condo projects just blocks away.

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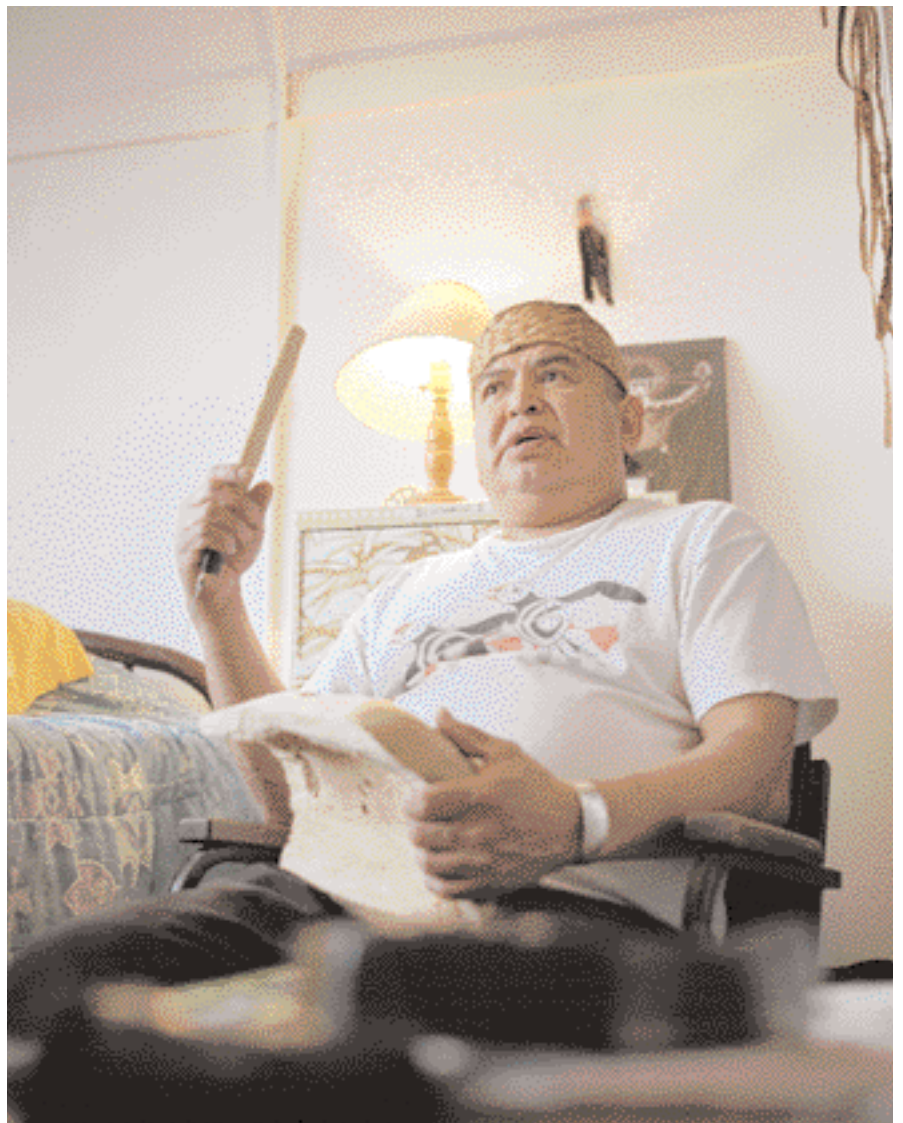
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and preserving the social housing here. Because this is where the support is, the community workers and the meal programs," he says. "There's people that would like to see the whole area redeveloped. But this is the neighbourhood that's here and we need this community."

EVERY WEDNESDAY IS KARAOKE NIGHT in the Dodson Pub, and on one of these I get to see what emergence could be. I sit at a table with Wiebe while Kitty, a tenant who runs the show, sings "That Don't Impress Me Much." If there can be any generalization about people who live on East Hastings, it is that they talk to each other. There are no defined tables of company here; people constantly circulate. There are hints of

notorious activity. A man offers me a pound of Starbucks coffee for two dollars. Drug dealers wearing two-piece track suits play pool, but thanks to the lighting, I can see that's all they're doing.

People keep approaching Wiebe to talk. A man sits down at our table. "I'm a self-employed native artist," he says. "I want to paint your walls." "I would be honoured," says Wiebe. "You let me know what you need." The artist gets animated as they discuss the details. He says he used to be at the bottom of the totem pole. "I used to walk around like this," he says, eyes to the ground, "and now I walk like this." Chin up. "I can see a good-lookin' salmon," he says, gesturing towards the south wall as if to some far-off vista.

Resident Ben Issac. An ex-gangster from Alert Bay, Issac—in addition to working at the Dodson—carves masks in his spare time, with a dealer for his wares on Granville Island.

JOHN O'NEILL SITS AT THE DODSON'S front desk, which is something like a nerve centre. Lots of tenants don't have telephones so they ask him if he's seen someone or give him a message to pass along. They also come to him with other problems. "I got to get off the crack," says one man, leaning against the door.

"Just say no!" O'Neill laughs, his booming Cape Breton-tinged voice confident, because he's done it himself.

Into his early thirties O'Neill worked for the Hells Angels distributing drugs, and he'll show you the stab wounds. He walked away, and now he boasts connections of a different kind. He's got a binder of carefully compiled lists of numbers: battered women's support, detox centres, street nurses, doctors, dental clinics that accept welfare patients, financial services, free laundry, free haircuts. "All I do is try to connect the dots," he says, adding that it's a hard enough job because of the roadblocks. Often people have to call at least twice before getting into a detox program. "What you have to realize about the folk down in this neighbourhood is that every once in a while they get these lit-



tle moments of clarity where they can actually think like normal people. And you got to take them at that moment. That's where I can use my influence and phone. I can get them right through to the person they need to see."

O'Neill began working at the Jubilee in the

early days, just after completing a drug and alcohol rehab program. He remembers what it was like before the tenants were evicted, when you walked down the halls and heard the sounds of guns being cocked. O'Neill has seen many people come into these SROs

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gence: the movement from low-level decisions to higher levels of sophistication.

People see the Downtown Eastside as a place that needs to be controlled. Wiebe names two kinds of control: unregulated, which is organized crime; and regulated, meaning all of the top-down organizations that structure our society. When Molthagen and Wiebe's group took possession of the Dodson, the police wanted to use the building for surveillance. Wiebe said no, because that's a power source that many tenants fear. Client relationships, law enforcement, bureaucratic rules: all are necessary. But he wants this to be a place to return to when the office door closes.

What if, Wiebe asks, we let the tenants find their own path? That is, we encourage random encounters with limited rules through which people can eventually define their own sense of wellness, which may or may not have anything to do with medications or appointments.

The issue of his spirituality is sensitive. He was asked to participate on a Woodward's committee as a "Christian voice" and declined. The church, after all, has been one

of the institutions to impose its own solution on people and he doesn't want to be aligned with that "agenda."

There are no rules about lifestyle at the Dodson or the Jubilee, unlike other SROs run by Christian groups. He does not organize prayer meetings. If they happen, they happen.

Almost once a week now, someone eager to invest drops by to see the building. But both Molthagen and Wiebe are wary of suggestions that they form a society or buy another building. Molthagen likes to stick with the formula he knows as a private developer. Wiebe maintains that an emergent environment depends on the small things that work, like one tenant who pays rent in \$20 increments when he has the cash. You can't duplicate a colony. It builds itself.

After our rambling conversations, Wiebe always worries that he's left something out, because emergence is not something you articulate, it's something you feel. But I've started to have random encounters of my own.

I run into Betty one evening in the Dodson lobby. She calls herself "Betty of Hastings," and indeed people keep tapping on the win-

dow to get her attention. She lives across the street and she's brought McDonalds takeout for her brother, who hasn't been able to take care of himself since an accident at residential school. Betty's got plenty of other things on the go: she has a talent for finding things that people need, antiques or outboard motors, and her cat just had kittens. She interrupts her story once when a man walks by and hands her a note printed with his name. "This is the guy whose life I saved," she says.

Wiebe keeps looking at me as she speaks, because she has story after story of power gone awry: the government worker who made her brother cry because he couldn't write his name, the band council that made bad decisions, the radio jockey that cut off one of her rants to poke fun of her use of the word "thingamajig." She doesn't tell these stories to elicit sympathy, but because she usually has a clever or heroic way of getting back at the system.

"Betty would probably have lots of good ideas about running a rooming house," Wiebe offers, and she nods. But when I ask what they are, she circumvents us too. "Not now," she says, yawning. "I've got too much

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IF THERE IS A CONTRADICTION between Wiebe, the ex-pastor and O'Neill, the gangster, Ben Isaac doesn't see it. They've both helped him. Once in a while he gets to the point where he starts to boil over and wants a drink, and he talks to one of them or goes to an AA meeting and it's like cold water over his head. He's been sober for a year.

Isaac lives and works at the Dodson. Recently he was signed up for a course in non-violent intervention. Just before, he'd joked with Wiebe that he might have to pop someone today, get it all out. When I visit him doing his front desk job, he gets a chance to practise those skills when a man comes in and says he wants to talk. Isaac tries to brush him off but he goes on. "I don't appreciate that you've been sayin' I'm lazy," he says, "and you owe me 50 bucks."

The argument is about a mask that Isaac was carving and some help that was (or was not) offered and money owed (or not owed). The man says that was the shitiest mask he ever saw. Ben opens the basement door and gets away.

He's fuming when he comes back. "The old Ben would want to shank him," he says. "If this was the old way I'd call my brothers down here, eh?" He continues his work, passing on messages and calling a plumber, but all afternoon he keeps returning to the mask. Gradually he loses the anger.

"When that guy sobers up and gets off crack he'll come in and shake my hand," he says, and a few days later that's exactly what happens. "You got to be patient with 'em, people with addictions. I got to remember that I was there once."

Isaac is a contact for his community in Alert Bay, and people call him when a family member has overdosed. He dresses the body and arranges for transportation back. He's much too urbanized to want to live on the island again, and although this is the worst-paying job he's ever had, the people are good. He thinks about becoming a drug counsellor, meeting a woman, moving to a place where—and here he laughs—"normal" people live.

I ask him what makes the Dodson different from other hotels, and he finally gives me the words I've been waiting to hear. "Those other places, they're residences, eh?" he says, waving down Hastings Street. "This is home." ●

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