



ROBSON REDUX

Backgrounder

The Robson Square Complex

Encompassing three city blocks, the Robson Square complex is the largest public space in downtown Vancouver, Canada. It is home to several key civic institutions including British Columbia's Provincial Law Courts, various government office buildings and the popular Vancouver Art Gallery. The University of British Columbia's downtown satellite campus is also accessible via the sunken plaza that extends below Robson Street.

What sets the three-block Robson Square complex apart from other public spaces in Vancouver is that it offers an introspective view of the city. Whereas Vancouver has successfully capitalized on its natural beauty and pastoral surroundings with other public spaces like the Seawall and Stanley Park, Robson Square represents a rare opportunity to celebrate Vancouver's vibrant—yet often overlooked—urbanism.

Visitors come to the Robson Square complex year-round. People can be found using any of the approximately three-dozen benches, chairs, and other forms of permanent furniture and seating fixtures dispersed throughout the space, leading the Square to function largely as a passive space. The Law Courts garden mound at the corner of Robson and Hornby also brings an inviting natural element to the space. The complex complements the adjacent North Plaza in front of the Vancouver Art Gallery along Georgia Street. The North Plaza is home to a large fountain, food trucks, and is a popular festival site in the summer.

800-block Robson Street

The 800-block of Robson St. is located at the centre of the Robson Square complex (see Fig. 1). Robson St. is officially classified as an arterial road. It is open to vehicle traffic for much of the year and serves an important downtown bus route. The block is a vital link between downtown neighbourhoods and is often used by people as a meeting point. In fact, this block sees one of the highest levels of daily pedestrian traffic in the city, with approximately 2,700 pedestrians passing by per hour on weekends and 1,800 pedestrians per hour on weekdays¹. The surrounding downtown area serves a dual role as a dense neighbourhood - nearly 80,000 residents live in the area - and as a major node of employment with 46,000 individuals working nearby. In addition, eight million tourists a year pass through the nearby Robson St. shopping area².

¹ Source: VIVA Vancouver 2013 summer pedestrian count survey

² Source: Robson St. Business Association

Transforming 800-block Robson into a Pedestrian Plaza

For the past four consecutive summers, the City of Vancouver's VIVA Vancouver program has closed 800-block Robson St. to all vehicle traffic and has partnered with various designers to create four very distinct temporary structures that have transformed the road into a seasonal pedestrian plaza—Picnurbia (2011), Pop Rocks (2012), Corduroy Road (2013) and Urban Reef (2014). These installations have allowed for the reconfiguration of the road space in a variety of ways, testing a mix of materials, structures, and seating orientations. This new tradition of a Robson St. installation returning from one year to the next has created a shared anticipation among Vancouverites to see what creative designs each summer will bring.

The temporary closure of 800-block of Robson to vehicles and the presence of an inviting pedestrian plaza installation has opened up new possibilities for people to connect to one another and the space, helping support the public space and social connection goals found in the City's Healthy City Strategy, Engaged City Report and the Transportation 2040 Plan. VIVA Vancouver's monitoring program has shown that by providing opportunities to sit, recline, or stand, passersby are encouraged to slow down as they move along the street, and as a result, a rich social space is created. In addition to the socializing and people-watching that is fostered by the presence of the installation, the presence of food trucks and impromptu street vending and busking in the space also invite spectating as well as lunchtime lounging. Together, the different elements of this space, and the various activities they support, create a vibrant public space in the midst of this busy urban setting.

Fig 1. The 800-block of Robson Street, in the heart of Robson Square



Additional Activity Anticipated in the Area for Summer 2015

It is anticipated that UBC's Robson Square entryway improvement project may be underway during the summer months of 2015. More information about the project can be found online at <http://former.vancouver.ca/devapps/800robson/index.htm>. The AutoCAD drawing, found under the Design Brief section of the Robson Redux website, shows the section of road space available in 2015 for the installation's placement.