

# WOODWARD'S

## Oral History Collection



Film stills from *Woodward's Narrated Demolition*. <http://wwas.221a.ca/>

Intro by Josh Gabert-Doyon

Two books were crucial to the development of the [Woodward's Amateur Historical Society \(W.W.A.S.\)](#) Oral History Archive, both in terms of process and as the foundations of research.

The first was what's commonly referred to as [The Woodsquat Book](#) (2003-2004) -a special issue of the journal *West Coast Line* made up mainly of contributions from squatters. Aaron Vidaver was the editor of *The Woodsquat Book*. He compiled poetry, play-by-play accounts, political commentary, photographs, personal essays, and how-to-guides from squatters, along with academic and legal texts, police documents retrieved through a Freedom of Information Request, and a whole bunch of contributions that are both incredibly captivating and impossible to categorize. Vidaver, who lived at the squat himself, was committed to a radically political set of documentary and archival practices, one aspect of which involved conducting interviews with the squatters and making sure that their oral testimony was included in the final account.

*The Woodsquat Book* sought to preserve both practical activist knowledge as well as uncompromising political energy that made the demands for social housing threatening to so many branches of state power. That political energy has become vital to the tradition of tent-city occupations across the Lower Mainland (and most recently Nanaimo). Mentions of Robert Pickton, the Frances Street Squat, and the Oka Crisis throughout *The Woodsquat Book* represent what "Jewel C" describes as a "Woodward's long history" in the book's final text. Through *The Woodsquat Book* the squat's position at a crucial (and rather bizarre) political juncture becomes articulated in the words of the squatters. The W.W.A.S. Oral History Archive collection comes out of an effort to revisit and ultimately to continue the kind of collective archival practices present in *The Woodsquat Book*, and to make sense of what happened after the squat.

The second book that undergirded this project is *Body Heat: The Story of Woodward's Redevelopment* (2010), a catalogue celebrating the Woodward's transformation told from the perspective of those who have lead the charge of gentrification in Vancouver's Downtown Eastside. In some ways it seems unconscionable that someone would willingly publish a book like this. Woodsquat receives a sentimental NGO-style black and white photo spread, presented completely without comment that slots in neatly within the grand trajectory of the Woodward's redevelopment. There are interviews and writing from "city-builders" of all kinds, packaged as a coffee-table art book. There's a real sincerity to this book that goes beyond just marketing: these are actually ideas that people believe in, that show how they live their lives and build their careers.

What's archived in *Body Heat* is an early period of "Artwashing" -a set of strategies used to create the conditions of precarity, both financial and cultural, under the guise (or sign) of art. In *Body Heat* we see the re-fabrication of neighbourhoods from scratch through managerial practices that are presented as part of an artistic vision. Not only do these practices flush out the cultures of resistance that arose from Woodsquat but they displace surrounding artistic communities through rising rents, like those that Penelope Heatherington, Joel Snowden, and Jim Carrico have helped to create.

A final note on the practice of interviewing and archiving here: this collection is formed through an array of collaborations and collective thinking, as all political efforts inevitably are. With the 221a cohort involving Brit Bachmann, Gabi Dao, and Byron Peters is added Jakob Knudsen and Vincent Tao, as well as the Vancouver Tenants Union and all those who participated in an open forum about art and developer money that was held in February ([BITE THE HAND THAT FEEDS: FORUM ON ART AND DEVELOPER MONEY on February 28, 2018](#)). While the W.W.A.S. Oral History Archive has made many interviews public-

ly available today, it is important to note that there were more interviews that were not recorded, and other conversations that remain essential to the project that do not take the form of a readily distributed "work" or document. One of the interviews collected here arose out of a series of classified ads that me and Brit Bachmann placed in local papers. I met Ivan Drury in Burnaby after a meeting with residents there. I spent several weeks playing soccer with Vancouver's Street Soccer League before speaking with Patrick Oleman and Debbie Krull. There are contradictions, cross-references, and transformations in these interviews that provide an ever-expanding picture of the political significance of the Woodward's building. From its time as a supply point for gold rush prospectors, a symbolic site of protest for unemployed workers during the Great Depression, and a beacon of Vancouver's suburbanization, we can plot a distinct history of nation-building and class conflict on the Woodward's site.

- JGB

For more information about the Woodward's Amateur Historical Society (W.W.A.S.) visit: <http://wwas.221a.ca>

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