

# Seedy Downtown Eastside hotel gets a makeover to provide 36 rooms for homeless women

BY TIFFANY CRAWFORD, VANCOUVER SUN DECEMBER 6, 2013



ATIRA Women's Resource Society CEO Janice Abbott in one of the new ly renovated rooms at the Empress Rooms in Vancouver, BC Friday, December 6, 2013. The Empress Rooms has 36 rooms and are a new housing resource for women at risk of homelessness and violence in the Downtown Eastside.

**Photograph by:** Jason Payne, PNG

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VANCOUVER -- Amid faded grey and yellow buildings in Vancouver's Downtown Eastside sits a freshly painted, bright periwinkle-blue hotel.

The colour of The Empress Rooms — a recently renovated single room occupancy hotel for homeless women on Alexander Street — was chosen on purpose, to symbolize intrepidity and resilience.

It's a poignant sentiment, given the terror and abuse that has taken place in recent years at the slum residences in the city's poorest neighbourhood.

"Blues and violets symbolize strength, if you believe in colour energy," said Janice Abbott, executive director of Atira Women's Resource Society, a not-for-profit agency that helps vulnerable women find

safe housing.

“We were going to paint it charcoal grey and then we thought, no it might look like a tombstone.”

Changing the image of the century-old building was important to help women feel safe. Previously called the Seaview, the rundown hotel has a history of drugs, gang activity and the torture and abuse of women.

“This place has a profoundly checkered history. There was a group of alleged drug dealers who lived here and women were being brought in and tortured, head shaved, lit on fire, raped, assaulted.”

Dressed in white slippers and fuzzy pyjamas, Jenna is one of 10 single women who moved into the 36-room building this week, just as temperatures plunged below zero in Vancouver. Another 12 women are expected to move in over the next few days and Atira still has 25 more applications to go through.

On Friday, after coming inside from having a cigarette in -3 C weather, Jenna gingerly removed a toque, revealing a shaved head and cuts.

“I got trapped and locked down at the end of the hall,” she said, recalling the horror she endured at the Seaview. “They had a metal gate and they locked you in there and tortured women and held them in there. I came running out, naked, screaming for my life.”

She said despite the trauma experienced at the Seaview, she feels safe living here, adding that it is a miracle to have a place to live after being homeless for two years.

“I wouldn’t be able to live on this floor, but upstairs that’s where I live. It’s nice. It’s comfortable. The first night was tough and I had to sleep with my light on and stuff because I was scared. There’s been overdoses, and people who have passed away in this building.”

The women who live at the hotel will pay \$375 a month and will also receive support services and one free meal a day. They will not be allowed to have guests for at least the first six months, as staff work to create a safe and clean environment.

“We have women staying here who have been hurt in here, and they say they can’t believe how nice it looks and how safe they feel here,” Abbott said.

Atira, which runs other women’s housing in the area, took over the building Aug. 1., after Vancouver police raided the hotel. Const. Brian Montague, a spokesman for the VPD, could not confirm whether any specific arrests were made around that time, but noted that police were called out to the Seaview on numerous occasions to deal with calls of assault, indecent acts, drugs, suspicious circumstances and fraud, to name just a few.

The tenants were evicted by the end of October, and after a month of renovations the women began moving in.

Besides painting the exterior, renovations included new flooring throughout the building, painted

walls, new windows and a kitchen. They also installed cameras in the common areas and at the front and back doors.

The provincial government provided \$350,000 to Atira to open the housing, although Atira also received private donations for the renovations. Two staff members have been hired and cameras installed.

B.C.'s Attorney General and Minister of Justice Suzanne Anton toured the newly renovated hotel on Friday, to mark a national day of remembrance and action on violence against women.

"This is a very important day with the commemoration of the women murdered at (École Polytechnique de Montréal) and also because it's so cold out. Women need a safe place to go," said Anton.

"The goal here is to get women into more permanent housing."

The province, in partnership with the City of Vancouver, has funded up to 160 shelter spaces that operate over the winter months. This year, Anton said the government will fund 75 shelter spaces, 40 rent supplements, 40 units of interim housing and the opening of The Empress Rooms.

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