

Vancouver Art Gallery to move to prime waterfront site

The surprising move was applauded by politicians but left some critics wondering where funding will come from for the new Plaza of Nations location

John Mackie

Vancouver Sun

Friday, May 16, 2008

VANCOUVER - After a three-year search, last fall the Vancouver Art Gallery announced plans to relocate to the former Greyhound Bus Depot site at Georgia and Hamilton.

Then two weeks ago, the provincial government called with an offer the gallery couldn't refuse.

And so Friday, Premier Gordon Campbell made the surprise announcement that the Vancouver Art Gallery is moving to the False Creek waterfront.

The VAG move was shoehorned into Campbell's press conference announcing that a new retractable roof will be installed on BC Place Stadium after the 2010 Olympics.

The gallery will be located just east of BC Place on the current site of the Plaza of Nations. The building, which has yet to be designed, will be 320,000 sq. ft., double the size of the VAG's current home in the old Vancouver courthouse at Robson and Hornby.

VAG director Kathleen Bartels said the gallery had considered the Plaza of Nations site when it was conducting its search for a new home, but "at that time the land just wasn't attainable for us."

This changed when the site's owner, Canadian Metropolitan Properties, cut a deal with PavCo (the provincial Crown corporation that runs BC Place) and the City of Vancouver for what a press release called "future development considerations" on Canadian Metropolitan's False Creek property.

Bartels is enthusiastic about the new site. "I think it's probably one of the most exciting sites in North America, to have a waterfront property in a [place] like Vancouver," she said. "It's a prime location."

Premier Campbell concurs.

"This is an opportunity for a 320,000-square-foot facility to complement British Columbia Place, to complement the whole eastern end of Georgia Street," he said. "We think that the waterfront location will be spectacular."



CREDIT:

The gallery will be located just east of BC Place on the current site of the Plaza of Nations.

Vancouver Mayor Sam Sullivan chimed in that the False Creek waterfront is the perfect setting for the type of landmark structure the VAG is hoping to build.

"There is a real advantage to this site, in that it can take a real iconic piece of architecture that will be right on the waterfront, and will really I think define the city," said Sullivan.

Bartels said that the VAG will hold an international competition to design the new building. She hopes it will open in late 2013 or early 2014, hopefully with a show by Vancouver's international art superstar Jeff Wall.

But precise details, such as the cost and who's going to pay for it, are sketchy. The standard formula in the past has been that the cost is split three ways between private fundraising and the federal and provincial governments.

The province has already announced it will give \$50 million toward the new gallery, which means it might be a \$150 million project. But it could be much higher: The Art Gallery of Ontario in Toronto is undergoing a \$254 million expansion designed by the internationally renowned architect Frank Gehry.

Another internationally acclaimed Vancouver artist, Stan Douglas, said the VAG is in dire need of a new facility.

"They always had trouble growing into that old [courthouse] building," said Douglas.

"To have a purpose-built building would be nothing but a benefit to the gallery and the city."

Still, he was surprised by the move from downtown to the waterfront.

"I thought the bus station was a better location," he said.

"I liked that area - the combination of the [Queen Elizabeth] theatre and access to downtown, it's a much more prominent location. It's more integrated with the city, the downtown core. The [False Creek location] is a bit off to the side, but you've got to work with what you can get."

Now the VAG has moved, the old bus depot/Larwill Park site on Georgia comes into play. Mayor Sullivan hinted that it might still house a cultural facility, the long-delayed Coal Harbour Arts Complex. The city collected \$20 million from developers and the province for the Coal Harbour Arts Complex, but the land was used for the new convention centre.

"We now have the opportunity in the Larwill [Park] site to look at the concert hall and theatre that's looking for a home, and possibly get some revenue from the site as well," said Sullivan.

jmackie@png.canwest.com

CLOSE WINDOW

Copyright © 2008 CanWest Interactive, a division of CanWest MediaWorks Publications, Inc. All rights reserved.
CanWest Interactive, a division of CanWest MediaWorks Publications, Inc. All rights reserved.