

## Removal of upside down church stirs storm of controversy

### Sculpture is now gone but strong opinions of artwork remain

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It left as it arrived, in a cloud of controversy.

As two cranes gingerly lifted the upside-down church sculpture from its moorings in the Coal Harbour area Wednesday, bystanders gathered in clusters to bid it adieu.

There was no shortage of opinions on the Vancouver park board's decision to uproot the unwieldy structure and ship it off to Calgary, where it will find a new home in the hands of the Glenbow Museum and its new president and CEO, Jeff Spalding.

Some had argued the sculpture, known as Device to Root Out Evil, is disrespectful of the church while others in the Coal Harbour area complained it blocked their view.

But most of the people who gathered to watch the delicate operation said it was a real shame to see the work by New York City artist Dennis Oppenheim go.

With a broad sweep of his arm, Art Kelm pointed to his seventh-floor apartment in a building that looked over the artwork. He was very sorry to see it go.

"I could see this being contested in the Bible Belt, but for free-thinking Vancouver, it's a real pity." So many tourists, he added, had stopped to snap pictures of the thought-provoking object sprouting at an odd angle from the earth.

In the background, you could hear the humming engines of two cranes standing guard over what looked like a whimsical toy that a perverse child had turned upside down and planted in the ground. Joggers, parents pushing strollers, office workers and tourists all paused to take in the curious sight.

Elaine Rusnack, who was born and raised in Calgary but now lives in Lethbridge, watched the sculpture's removal with her husband Terry. "I am so happy Jeff Spalding had the foresight to move it to Calgary," she said. "I can't wait to see where it is going to go."

Not everyone was so enthusiastic about the gently seditious artwork.

"I'm glad it's gone. I was dead set against it," said Barry Ehrl, who works in an office nearby. "It's sacrilegious. It's wrong. In this day and age, if it were turned the other way around, it would be fine."



CREDIT: Bill Keay, Vancouver Sun

Workers from Pro-Tech Industrial Movers remove top section of the controversial Device to Root Out Evil sculpture, which was a feature of the Coal Harbour waterfront.

"I hope they drop it in the ocean somewhere," said Larry Parker, a tourist from Wyoming.

"I don't like the religious implications of it." If the structure were a school rather than a church, it would be okay with him. "I happen to be fairly religious."

He also didn't feel the structure blended in well with the environment. "It looks a little awkward there."

Standing in workman's overalls, Tony Sawyer applauded its removal. "That's not art," he said.

"It's a nice sculpture but it's not art."

Lost in the swirl of controversy was the fact that the sculpture was never meant to be permanent. It, along with 23 others on parkland and city property, were installed on a temporary basis for the Vancouver Sculpture Biennale - Open Spaces, an 18-month project meant to celebrate urban public art. They all went on the auction block March 1 so they could find new homes around the world.

One of the onlookers was Kelly Mullen, the wife of Neil Mullen, who owns ProTech Industrial Movers, the company handling the artwork's removal. "What they move is incredible," she said, adding that the company had recently moved some totem poles in Stanley Park.

The removal of the upside-down church and its transplantation to Calgary was just one big family operation.

Neil's son Jamie is poised to receive the artistic hot potato in Calgary and put it back together again.

Although the church sculpture's removal took the better part of the day, Neil saw it as being all in a day's work. He specializes in moving art around.

"Each one has its own challenges," he said. "But the guys are well-versed in it. We have every piece of equipment known to man."

Tourists seemed genuinely perplexed by both the structure and the controversy it had so obviously engendered.

One member of a group from England and Wales asked why it was upside down, pondered, then concluded that it was difficult to get into the mindset of it.

Pointing to the wide-open vistas around the sculpture, Joan Cass of Vancouver wondered whose view it was blocking. She is a staunch defender of the piece. "I'm very, very disgusted. It was controversial, unique, a conversation piece."

Cherry Rosario of Surrey and Dharmistha Patel of Vancouver, who would often come down to the spot to jog together along the waterfront, said they will miss the artwork.

"Actually, it's a little sad," said Rosario.

Patel felt the park board should have waited until at 2010 to remove it, but she was glad the sculpture is staying in Canada.

"Religious things always seem to bring up a backlash," said Rosario. "It's strange."

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