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Beyond FIFA: Rethinking Vancouver's "City of Reconciliation"

Unceded territories of the xʷməθkʷəʔəm (Musqueam), Skwxwú7mesh (Squamish) and səliłwətał (Tsleil-Waututh) Nations, known as Vancouver, BC – "Indigenous people don't have anything to reconcile... We didn't do anything to Canada. Now, Canada does need to reconcile with its history, its behaviours, its actions."

As the executive director of Frog Hollow Neighbourhood House and a longtime advocate within Vancouver's urban Indigenous organizing history, Norm Leech has heard the term used by every level of government for over a decade. Frog Hollow specifically hired Leech to decolonize the neighbourhood house. He describes the work as distinct from, and larger than, reconciliation. It means helping people recognize that the systems we take as given, like private property or the separation of people from land, are not inevitable, but the intended effects of colonization. This reframes what housing means, too.

Vancouver's designation as a "City of Reconciliation," adopted in 2014 and folded into the city's messaging around hosting this summer's FIFA World Cup, carries implications beyond the branding itself. The World Cup gave Vancouver a temporary opportunity to present itself as a global and inclusive city. But looking at how public space and funding operated within an increased surveillance infrastructure during the tournament reveals a more complicated question, around who gets included in that vision of the city, and what happens to people whose presence does not fit in.

Vancouver's urban Indigenous framework is built around a nation-to-nation relationship with title-holding Nations on their own territory, not on supporting all Indigenous individuals in Vancouver. This means the City of Vancouver primarily works with the Musqueam, Squamish, and Tsleil-Waututh Nations. While this is very positive and important, a gap remains for the urban Indigenous populations.

"Their definition, as it currently is, really only extends to the title-holding Nations here on these lands," Leech says. "Which excludes the 70,000 Indigenous people who live here and are not within their traditional territories."

Musqueam, Squamish, and Tsleil-Waututh have an inherent right to a nation-to-nation relationship with the city on their own territory and terms, and their involvement hosting the soccer tournament reflects that governance. The gap Leech is describing is what happens after this relationship is honoured: whether the city builds anything comparable for the Indigenous population living in Vancouver without the same standing. Leech argues that the legal framework governing consultation privileges title-holding Nations, leaving the urban Indigenous population he works with outside that equation. And when the city does engage this wider group, he is unimpressed by what tends to count as consultation.

Leech recalls, “I’ve been to a few meetings where they’ve presented their perspective and distributed a survey sheet to give us feedback. No, I don’t think that counts.”

Melody Wise, a community-based research manager whose work is concentrated in the Downtown Eastside, understands the intersection of FIFA and “reconciliation” through more than a decade of research, evidence and community-identified priorities that emerged through the AESHA (An Evaluation of Sex Workers’ Health Access) project.

While FIFA has introduced a marked expansion of police presence and surveillance infrastructure in the DTES, Wise reports that this does little to resolve dynamics of over-policing and under-protection that continue to impact Indigenous sex workers in the community. She notes that “a 2020 peer-reviewed study by our team found that among sex workers in Metro Vancouver who experienced violence, only 26% reported the incident to police.” Indigenous and sex-working women in the Downtown Eastside spent years warning the police about a serial killer, only to be ignored. More than a decade since the Missing Women Commission of Inquiry released its final report, many of the 63 recommendations focused on policing reforms and social supports for women remain unmet.

Wise documented the pragmatic version of a decision the city made that was meant to be temporary. Over 200 CCTV cameras were installed around the city, concentrated in the DTES, alongside a heavier presence of police, city engineering crews, and park rangers. The pattern is difficult to separate from a broader effort to keep visible poverty out of view for a global audience of tourists and investors. The scale of that surveillance also sits in tension with Vancouver’s designation as a City of Reconciliation, particularly in a neighbourhood with one of the country’s largest urban Indigenous populations.

The cameras were intended to operate only through the tournament between June 7 and July 19, 2026. At the time of Wise’s interview, however, they remained in place. She later confirmed that they had been removed, although their removal was delayed by nearly a month.

Leech saw the same buildup from a different perspective. He served for several years as the co-chair of the Vancouver Police Department’s Indigenous Advisory Committee, resigning last year partly due to a change in leadership, he says, and partly because he’d watched policing become entangled with city politics.

He confirmed noticing a heavier police presence throughout the city, which involved 100 new officers promised and delivered at a reported cost of an extra \$50 million.

“For major cities now, half the budget is law enforcement,” he says. “I don’t believe that’s what makes cities more liveable. I believe non-profits, volunteers, and community organizations are what make cities more liveable.”

If there is a detail that captures the distance between the city’s language and its follow-through beyond engagement, it’s the funding. Wise explained the difference between symbolic actions and actual investment in community supports. “Project-based, time-limited funding means organizations are constantly chasing the next grant,” she says.

According to Wise, “our current moment is also one marked by a provincially declared epidemic of gender-based violence, with documented and disproportionate impacts on marginalized sex workers, especially those who are Indigenous, street-based or gender minorities.” Despite this, efforts from the City to ensure adequate gender-safety supports in the lead-up to FIFA came extremely last-minute.

SWIFA (Sex Workers Interrupting FIFA Atrocities), a grassroots, mutual aid network that Wise is a part of, worked to fill this gap. On match days, the group ran drop-ins that offered harm reduction supplies, donated clothes, meals, on-site medics, and a place to rest. These efforts were supported by a small City grant, and funding the group raised itself. On the busiest days, more than 200 women came through the space, a number Wise sees as evidence of how few safe spaces existed for marginalized and criminalized women during an event defined by heavy police presence and enormous displacement pressures.

The experience of FIFA in Vancouver poses an issue that extends beyond the tournament itself: what does reconciliation look like when people most affected by the city’s decisions continue to be pushed out of public view?

For Wise, the answer cannot be found in temporary measures that disappear when the cameras do. “You displace people from one part of the neighbourhood into another part of the neighbourhood...there’s all of these forces that are trying to displace [residents of the neighbourhood] even further, out of sight.”

Displacement does not begin or end with FIFA, it is just a small part of a history which the Downtown Eastside’s residents and organizations have been facing for decades. While they are being asked to adapt to changing priorities, again and again, the community continues to face inadequate housing, over-policing, and lack of social service supports. The tournament made these tensions more visible to the public eye, but it did not create them.

If Vancouver wants its designation as a “City of Reconciliation” to signal more than a message plastered on the arena walls of major events, reconciliation must be measured by what remains after the event is over: whether Indigenous people living in the city have a voice in decisions that affect them, and whether community organizations have resources to do their work.

The Aboriginal Housing Management Association (AHMA) is an organization whose mandate is to address the housing needs of urban Indigenous peoples. AHMA members provide housing to Indigenous people living off-reserve, in municipalities across BC.

“Indigenous housing is not a cost to be managed, says AHMA CEO, Margaret Pfoh. “It is an investment. If government wants stronger workforce participation, safer and healthier communities, better outcomes for children, dignity and security for Elders, reduced pressure on healthcare and justice systems, and meaningful economic reconciliation, housing helps deliver all of it.”

The organizations already doing this work are not waiting for another major event to arrive. Groups like AHMA, Frog Hollow Neighbourhood House, and SWIFA are providing housing, services, advocacy, and community support in ways that make Vancouver more liveable every day. Supporting these organizations means supporting the people they serve long after the cameras are gone.

For a city that calls itself a City of Reconciliation, that is where the work must begin.

About the Author:

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Positionality Statement

I write this as a non-Indigenous student and volunteer with AHMA, working and learning on the traditional, ancestral, and unceded territory of the Coast Salish Peoples, including the territories of the Musqueam, Squamish, and Tsleil-Waututh Nations. I have spent my whole life on these lands, benefiting from opportunities made possible through systems of land dispossession and injustice that continue to shape who has access to space, land, resources, and decision-making power. This article is not intended to speak for Indigenous peoples, but to share what I learned from those who have spent decades supporting Indigenous peoples in Vancouver’s Downtown Eastside.