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What do resource pipelines and building cranes have in common?

Seb Bonet

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In colonial British Columbia, there is a lot riding on the answer to this question. The elites want us to think they represent the latest and most visible symbols of prosperity for all. But to many people who are Indigenous or living with low incomes, pipelines and cranes represent the the latest in a long series of displacements.

Here in Victoria, one place to start tracing the relationship between building cranes and displacement is the view from the mayor's window at city hall. Earlier this year, a bench was removed across the street from Mayor Fortin's office. Months prior to that, he had complained about having to look at elder members of the street-involved community who liked to gather at the bench and share a drink.

At about the same time, and in the same place, large white signs went up announcing the proposed redevelopment of the block into two office buildings by Jawl Properties, the largest private land owner in Victoria. Perhaps it was while imagining

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his new view that mayor Fortin excitedly announced that there are “more cranes up than in 2006, which was the height of the building boom.”

Fortin’s observation is bad news for low-income people who are already under serious survival stress. Looking back to 2006, by the time the cranes had finished their work, then Mayor of Victoria, Alan Lowe, was forced to strike up a task force on homelessness to address the crisis of poverty visible to the middle-class eye.

Unfortunately, it seems history is lining up repeat to itself. For example, the number of people coming through the door at Our Place, the city’s largest service provider for people with low-incomes, reached a record this December, January and February. This statistic for Victoria corresponds with last week’s announcement in Vancouver that the number of people counted on the street doubled from the previous year.

Research being completed by the Vancouver Island Public Interest Research Group (VIPIRG) supports the idea that in these neoliberal times, displacement and homelessness follow building cranes. VIPIRG has found that the low-income end of the market housing spectrum has virtually ceased to exist in Victoria. In all, there are fewer than two dozen units of housing left at the shelter rate of \$375, and about 250 units renting for under \$500 in the entire city. Not surprisingly, vacancy rates for this meagre pool of units is almost non-existent.

This means that as buildings for people who can buy or pay high rents are completed, and rents rise through gentrification, no stock of housing exists to absorb the displaced. That would require progressive responses from the city and the province in the form of rent controls, and the provincial and federal governments in the form of higher wage and assistance rates, progressive taxation and a social housing program. Unfortunately, these layers of government are busy making sure that the emerging city exists for developers and not for low-income communities.

Courageous resistance by Indigenous people has raised people’s consciousness that pipelines represent the open veins of Turtle Island – and that any meaningful action to heal the land will have to address the ongoing violence of settler colonialism. Similarly, anti-poverty activists are working to show that building cranes are the visible form of the capitalist economic system making Victoria in its own exclusive image. Getting those cranes out of the neoliberal skyline requires addressing the logic of capitalism.

If it were up to me, the thing pipelines and cranes would have in common is strong, visible resistance movements that connect the dots between the colonial displacement of Indigenous people out on the land and the gentrification of the remaining pockets of low-income housing in the city. Blocking pipelines and bringing down cranes are connected fronts in a struggle that appears to be intensifying. The outcome remains in our hands.