

# THE CITY AFTER DARK:

## A European approach to nightlife

By Stacey Forrester



### SUMMARY

This article explores new partnership models in urban nightlife planning. Inspired by the cross-sector approach that many cities in Europe are taking, the BC-based non-profit Good Night Out Vancouver, is working with local government and the nightlife economy to address the safety and social challenges of urban nightlife in Vancouver. With roots in the UK, Good Night Out works with municipalities to help support the safety of women in cities after dark, through initiatives that see collaboration and culture change as essential to creating safer public spaces at night and beyond.

### RÉSUMÉ

Cet article explore de nouveaux modèles et approches de partenariat dans la planification de la vie nocturne urbaine. Inspiré par l'approche intersectorielle adoptée par de nombreuses villes d'Europe, l'organisme sans but lucratif Good Night Out Vancouver, basé en Colombie-Britannique, travaille avec le gouvernement local et le monde de la vie nocturne pour relever les défis sociaux et liés à la sécurité dans le cadre de la vie nocturne urbaine à Vancouver. Bien ancré au Royaume-Uni, Good Night Out travaille avec les municipalités pour aider à soutenir la sécurité des femmes dans les villes après la tombée de la nuit, grâce à des initiatives qui considèrent la collaboration et le changement culturel comme essentiels pour créer des espaces publics plus sûrs la nuit et au-delà.

It's the early hours of a Saturday morning in Vancouver's nightlife center, the Granville Entertainment District (GED). A young man, likely not more than 20 years old has just been reunited with his friends, after being found wandering alone and intoxicated in an alley. "What are you, like the Red Cross for drunk people?" he asks his rescuers after they give him some water and return him to the night. While not the Red Cross, the young women who have helped him are part of a not-for-profit international campaign, *Good Night Out*, whose work in Vancouver aims to foster new cultural practices in Vancouver's nightlife and offer the City a new, European-molded approach to the safety and social challenges of urban nightlife.

**Dominant narratives on nightlife focus on two extremes: its value to the post-industrial creative city and proliferation of disorder – to which the typical reaction is to over-regulate.**

The dominant narratives (and subsequent policies) around nightlife tend to focus on



two extremes: The value of nightlife centres to the post-industrial “Creative City” and proliferation of disorder, along with other anti-social behaviours that happen within them. There is no denying that nighttime centres are an integral part of a city’s identity. Entertainment districts serve to attract young people to the central business district, boosting local economies, creating jobs, supporting tourism, and acting as a cultural lifeline. Hospitality Vancouver reports that the 14 liquor-primary licenced establishments in the GED alone are responsible for more than 900 jobs and \$43.5 million in economic impact to the city. Through their workshops and venue audit system, *Good Night Out* challenges the notions that the Creative City and these nightlife establishments are inherently accessible and democratic spaces, forcing nightlife stakeholders and local government to ask: who is truly welcome in our nightlife center; who feels safe here; who is represented in these sites of cultural production; and what can be done to make nightlife safer and more accessible to all?

As frequently as it is exalted, the urban nighttime centre is often problematized, particularly when a highly publicized incident such as an overdose or fire in a venue, forces a spotlight onto what happens in a city after dark. Under this light, nighttime centers can look chaotic, becoming sites where prevalent anti-social behaviours, such as physical violence, binge drinking, drug use, sexual harassment, and assault run rampant after dark. While disorder and crime are not unique to any one city at night, the reaction from planners and local authorities is often to over-regulate, police, and control these spaces through increased surveillance, overly bureaucratic licensing, moratoriums, and restrictive liquor regulations. While these regimes are implemented with the intent to prioritize crime prevention, and reduce disorder and harm, they can also have negative economic<sup>1</sup> and cultural impacts. Heightened regulation can also create tension between stakeholders on both sides, pitting business owners and venue security staff against City officials and enforcement entities such as police.

**A non-traditional approach, through cross-sector collaboration and culture change, helps close the gap in the traditional dichotomy.**



**Emerging as an unlikely stakeholder in the nighttime economy, *Good Night Out* provides an non-traditional framework for key nightlife players to build capacity to prevent and respond to sub-criminal behaviours, such as harassment, and more serious crimes, like sexual assault.**

Emerging as an unlikely stakeholder in the nighttime economy, *Good Night Out*, a UK-based feminist project, provides an non-traditional framework for key nightlife players – bars, pubs, and clubs – to build capacity to prevent and respond to sub-criminal behaviours, such as harassment, and more serious crimes, like sexual assault.

While planners and politicians may over-react to nightlife disorder through increased surveillance and stronger liquor regulation, *Good Night Out* sees collaboration and culture change as essential to creating safer public spaces at night and beyond. In just four years, this model has extended beyond the UK, with *Good Night Out* Chapters now



located in Australia, Denmark, Chile the United States, and Canada.

*Good Night Out* started in the UK in 2014, as a grassroots project to end gendered harassment on nights out. In its early days, the organization offered training upon request, charging the venue a small fee for a two-hour workshop and subsequent certification. Despite research that confirms sexual harassment is a global phenomenon to which the UK is not immune, initial uptake from the venues to pay for voluntary training was slow. Within two years, a shift occurred, as municipal councils increasingly contacted *Good Night Out* to work collaboratively with them to address the issue of women's safety at night. Working with representatives from liquor licencing and larger local governmental projects to address gendered harassment and violence, *Good Night Out* now works in official partnership with municipalities, with councils paying for licenced nightlife venues to receive prevention training.

Ester van Kempen, co-director and trainer with *Good Night Out* in the UK, credits patience and adaptability as key assets for similar small projects looking to scale up and work with local government. Ester states that working in partnership means that their relationships with nightlife stakeholders are more sustainable in the long term,



and that they garner more widespread community support for their initiatives. They have managed to do this without watering down their content, remaining focused on the social and root causes of violence against women and the LGBT2Q community worldwide. This approach benefits larger communities as a whole, as research has shown that when you make public realms safer and more accessible for marginalized community members, everyone experiences the positive benefits.

**Within two years of its launch, *Good Night Out* Vancouver has grown and strengthened stakeholder relations and gained local government support, contributing to sense of safety in the city.**

In 2015, two women from Vancouver began a best practice scan for initiatives addressing sexual harassment and assault in nightlife in North America and internationally. Their research revealed only a few small scale nonprofit initiatives, mostly run out of cities with prominent nighttime entertainment districts (including *Good Night Out* in South East London). It was not long until the first chapter outside of the UK was launched in Vancouver. Much like its UK cohort, *Good Night Out* Vancouver was initially tasked with 'selling' the issue of women's safety to local nightlife stakeholders. In their first six months, *Good Night Out* Vancouver reached out to nearly 100 establishments with some form of a liquor license and delivered training to just three.





Like the UK Chapter, *Good Night Out* Vancouver persevered, refined their interventions, and continued to connect with various stakeholders of the nightlife sector. Local government soon took notice.

In 2017, *Good Night Out* Vancouver was invited by the City to sit on a working group on safety in the Granville Entertainment District. From this working group, the *Good Night Out* Granville Street Team was born. Initially launched as a pilot, this outreach team is modeled after the Rembrandtplein square hosts, who use an 'eyes on the street' approach to increase nighttime safety in a bar-filled square in central Amsterdam. This outreach team works in the public realm, engaging patrons, venue staff, and police to assist patrons to

address safety issues and change the public experience while in the Entertainment District. The team carries Ipads, which allows them to track information about each intervention, including the gender presentation of the people needing supports, and time and nature of the incidents they encounter. This collaboration with police and the City has raised the profile of *Good Night Out* and led to further trainings for venues and outreach from more stakeholders connected to nightlife in Vancouver. The Vancouver Park Board also consulted *Good Night Out* Vancouver regarding a motion requiring all festivals held on Park Board property to submit a plan that accounts for the safety women and other vulnerable patrons.

**Current and reliable data on harassment formed the basis for permanent funding of *Good Night Out's* Granville Street Team.**

During the seven-week pilot, which launched in September 2017, the *Good Night Out* Granville Street Team recorded supporting 315 people, offering such supports as wellness check-ins, assistance to over-intoxicated patrons of all genders, intervention in instances of harassment, links to police, and overdose management. The data collected by the Street Team is central to the longevity of this project. The information collected from the pilot was presented to City Council this spring, which resulted in a unanimously approved motion for the City of Vancouver to seek





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out a collaborative funding model with the Downtown Vancouver Business Improvement Association to support the Granville Street Team operation on a permanent basis. While *Good Night Out* Vancouver's efforts align with the City's recently adopted Women's Equity Strategy and its goal to increase women's sense of safety by at least 10%, the actions carried out by the team, have been shown to support both men and women nearly equally.



## During the pilot, *Good Night Out* carried out a survey, which showed that 87% of respondents did not feel safe in the Granville Entertainment District.

In Fall of 2018, the first installment of this funding was received from the City of Vancouver's Engineering department, which has identified that it can benefit from insight that the Street Team data provides about how Granville Street is used after dark. The Team has been a permanent fixture in the GED since June, with *Good Night Out* Vancouver retaining responsibility for staffing, program administration, and oversight. This round of funding also provides for engagement with other stakeholders in the GED twice a year to ensure the program collaborates with venue owners, security, and other services in the area.

There is little in the area of reliable data on bar room harassment, or harassment in general, which poses a challenge when it comes to evaluating the success of the Street Team. The lack of indicators is attributed to the fact that most public realm or street harassment falls into a grey area of the law in Canada, with criminal charges unlikely to stick for the type of verbal harassment often experienced by women on nights out.

The next task for *Good Night Out* Vancouver is to establish evaluation metrics for the Granville Street Team. During the pilot, *Good Night Out* carried out a survey, which showed that 87% of respondents did not feel safe in the Granville Entertainment District and shared the reasons why. Participants could select multiple factors that contributed to their feeling unsafe: 53% indicated that they had witnessed the harassment of someone else and 40% had been harassed themselves. At time of writing, this survey is being repeated one year to the date

from the initial survey, to explore if the public sense of safety while in the GED has increased, if harassment has gone down, and if the presence of the Street Team is having an impact on public perceptions of safety. The findings of this survey will be analyzed alongside the breakdown of the data collected about the Teams' activities and feedback from the venues. A report will be released in June, that hopefully

shows the public reporting an increased sense of safety, increased awareness of the Street Team, less self-reported experiences of harassment, and an indication by stakeholders that they see value and opportunities to work with the Team to support patron safety.

In the past five years, urban centres across Europe have taken a more holistic approach to nightlife planning, one that looks beyond the economic impact, and chooses to focus also on the social, DIY, and community building aspects of nighttime centres, a shift that is slowly making its way into North America. Through the establishment of nightlife mayors and nighttime councils, along with increased collaboration across stakeholders, a new way of planning for after-dark is emerging. As the work of *Good Night Out* in the UK and locally highlights, local governments and planners have many tools at their disposal to help nurture a nighttime economy that is profitable, accessible, and equipped to prioritize a culture of both safety and excitement after dark, especially for our communities' more vulnerable members. The future of nightlife depends heavily on this cross-sector engagement, as well as data-driven policy and funding, to harness the power of local experts in order to create after-dark spaces that are safe, sustainable, and democratized sites of entertainment, connection, and true culture change. ■

### FOOTNOTE

<sup>1</sup> See the case of Sydney's Last Entry Program, as reported by the City of Sydney and Council of Capital City Lord Mayors 2015.

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