

There's No Place Like Home.

It's no place like home. Victoria's Holiday Court Motel is 22 rooms of trouble, a policing nightmare and a shooting gallery for drug addicts. But it's also a transient shelter for people with nowhere else to go. Columnist Jody Paterson, who stayed at the motel, today begins a five-part Times Colonist series on this unsettling landmark.



"Do you like the blues?" he asks, putting on Taj Mahal. The lifestyle doesn't allow for much, but at least there's this: a half-decent turntable and a couple of dozen albums.

He used to have a dictionary too, a 1,200 page Webster, but it was stolen. He hates to think what might have happened to it by now, its lovely thin pages probably ripped out to make those little triangular packages the cocaine dealers call flaps.

Name five words that start with x, he quizzes me. I got four. Xylophone, X-ray. Xenophobia. Xanadu. Think of trees, he coaches, and I remember, xylem.

Life started out for him 50 or so years ago in England and has ended up in Victoria's Holiday Court Motel. He doesn't like it here. Who would? All the noise and commotion. Police and ambulance lights flashing every night in the parking lot. People running along the balcony, one person or another knocking on door after door looking to buy or sell a little bit of misery. The ceiling leaks. The hot water and heat regularly

quit working. And good friends are dying all around him.

No, this isn't home. This is just the place where you stop on the way to something either better or worse. And he knows which way he's hoping to go. "I'm in transit," he says. "I've got to get out of this place.

Haven for Drugs

Victoria social agencies think of it as "our mini downtown eastside," a microcosm of Vancouver's infamous drug district. The Holiday Court Motel is 22 rooms of trouble, both for the people who live here and the agencies expected to do something about it.

Troubles: Like a lot of things, the ride down started with money.

It's a policing nightmare, taking up "a disproportionate amount of our resources," says Victoria Police Insp. Darrell McLean. Police were called 371 times to the motel on Hillside Ave at the edge of Victoria's downtown last year and laid 157 charges, and 16 people were taken to hospital after overdosing there over the course of the year.

Murder victims Mary-Anne Ford and Carla Slots had longtime ties to Holiday Court. And in a

typical, maybe even quiet, night last month when I stayed there, one drunken guest cut his own throat with a bottle after his girlfriend broke up with him and another regular was stabbed in the leg across the street.

The dealing and use of heroin and cocaine at the motel is constant and vast. At least eight motel residents are dealers as well as users; if the drug of choice isn't available at one door, it will be at another.

People sell mostly to support their own addictions, and McLean compares police attempts to stop the drug trafficking at Holiday Court to "trying to bail out the Inner Harbour." They do what they can, responding to complaints and keeping an eye on the place. But there isn't the resources to do much more than that.



And while there are only 35 or so official residents at any given time and not all of them are injecting cocaine or heroin, the motel has become a shooting gallery for users from throughout the region. As many as 1,000 discarded syringes a day are collected by Holiday Court residents and taken to Victoria's needle exchange.

But it's also the home of last resort for people with nowhere else to go. It's a roof overhead, a door that locks, cable TV and no judgments, things that people in the advanced stages of addiction have learned not to take for granted.

Open door street minister Al Tysick calls them "the hard-to-house," the ones whose addiction and all the accompanying problems of prostitution, dealing and violence make them unpopular choices as tenants. If no one else will take you, says Tysick, there's always the Holiday Court.

At \$24 a night for a dirty and shabby room with no phone and often just sheets for curtains, (\$520 a month if the manager likes you) the motel's no bargain. Five of the rooms are currently too wrecked from previous tenants and managerial neglect to be rentable. But motel regulars say it's better than it was a couple of years ago, when there were rats and roaches and the room rate was \$10 higher.

And each of the four times that a special SWAT team of health, building-safety and police officials have descended on the motel in the past three years looking for violations, nothing too alarming has been found. "I've seen a lot worse than the Holiday Court," says Maxine Marchenski, chief environmental health officer with the Capital Health region.

So it continues to exist, the most concentrated pocket of injection-drug use in the region and the controversial epicentre of neighbourhood crime. This is what the unpretty terminus of addiction looks like in a society that denies it - and like its guests, the Holiday Court is a long way from where it thought it was doing.

Reversal of Fortune.

Like a lot of things, the ride down started with money. There has been a Holiday Court Motel in one form or another for more than 50 years on the Hillside property, but the current building's fate was sealed when former Victoria real-estate speculator Gunter Yost bought the place in 1988.

Yost was a high-rolling guy at the peak of his moving and shaking in those years. Between 1986 and 1990, he amassed almost \$11 million in other people's money to buy and sell property in the region.

The Holiday Court was still a tourist motel back then, although already falling off the map. Tysick says he sees it all the time: a glamorous new hotel opens up in town and bumps to second place whichever one was most popular up until then, which in turn bumps the next one to third, and on it goes all the way down the line. "When a motel starts renting to my people, I know things have changed," says Tysick.

The change started in earnest at the Holiday Court around 1993, when Yost began looking to unload the motel and brought in Max Weegar to manage for a few months until it sold. Weegar recently suffered a stroke that ended his real-estate career and was looking for work.



But sale plans fell through, perhaps as a result of softening market for commercial real estate. Yost's fortunes turned soft right along with the market, and he lost the Holiday Court soon after in a foreclosure brought by investors Eugenia Kubica and her son Roman. Eugenia's husband Leszek was in fact the investment brains in the Esquimalt family, having done quite nicely in the boom years of the late 1980s when investing in mortgages brought returns of as high as 20 per cent.

But he likely he took substantial losses as well when the market turned. And so it was that after his death in 1994, his aging widow and son suddenly found themselves neck deep in the seedy-motel business and an array of other investments. "They're always in here doing title searches," says one of the staff at the provincial land-title office near the law courts.

One thing they own is the Holiday Court, although not really: the People's Trust Company, a private bank owned by Alberta's Ghermezian family, hold the \$650,000 first mortgage Roman Kubica took out on the motel property six years ago. Kubica has been trying to sell it ever since and almost did last year, but the deal fell through.

It isn't easy to cover a \$6400 monthly mortgage payment when your motel has fallen from favour; Weegar recalls the place taking in no more than \$6,000 or \$7,000 a month during his tenure. So maybe it's unsurprising the Kubicas took the path of least resistance. Weegar was kept on and given his marching orders: Spend nothing and make as much as you can, a job he would do well for the next seven years.

"I guess it started going downhill around the time I took it over," acknowledges Weegar, replaced as manager last summer.

"The family is old-country, so every penny is rubbed. If I needed to get a man in to fix the furnace, they'd want me to two-bit it all the way. The motel went down, down, down, and to tell you the truth, I was kind of relieved when they let me go in July."

Weegar charged guests \$35 a night during his tenure; long-term residents paid \$650 a month, which just happened to be the shelter portions from two people's welfare cheques. The owners would complain from time to time about the "ladies of the night" doing their business out of the motel, but Weegar would point out they were the most profitable because he could charge them by the day. "I had one young lady who paid \$35 a night for two months straight."

Room-cleaning was minimal if at all and the trend appears to be continuing under the new manager, who refused comment beyond noting that Weegar has done "bad things" with the place and that change was coming. Weegar says he'd sometimes go six months without access to a room beyond handing in clean sheets and towels.

"They'd be disaster when we'd finally get into them, and there'd be needles everywhere. I used to remind the maids not to run their hands between the mattresses because that's where the hookers always stashed their needles."

It can't be proud work, turning a motel into a flophouse for the desperate. But Weegar seems to have tried to balance it out by becoming something of a social worker. He and his wife cooked Sunday dinners for motel regulars, went to the funerals - and there were always funerals - and visited people in hospital. Holiday Court regulars as well as a number of social agencies remember Weegar's tenure fondly.

"These people are humans who need a place to live," says Weegar. "I'd go to kick somebody out but then I'd think 'Man, I'm not going to do that.' Where are they going to go?"

Addicts Struggle.

Indeed, that may be the reason for Holiday Court's survival to date. The social agencies most involved with the motel don't mind having their high-risk people gathered in one place, whether for ease of providing services or riding herd on the myriad problems that addiction spawns when left to fester in the margins.



More importantly, they recognize the pointlessness of forcing 35 or so people and a whole lot of hangers-on out of their homes when there's nowhere for them to go. "It's a place where we can find people, where they at least have shelter. It's an intervention point," says deputy medical officer Dr. Linda Poffenroth.

But there's definitely a downside to doing nothing about Holiday Court, both for the people who live there and their neighbours. How do you go about escaping your addiction when every one of your friends and fellow motel guests are dealers and active addicts themselves? Why does being an addict mean having to accept living amid violence and squalor? And how long will surrounding businesses and residents, already arming for political battle, put up with having to carry more than their share of city crime, discarded syringes and used condoms?

"People have to have somewhere to live, other people to be with who they feel comfortable around. What other accommodation is there?" says Victoria Police Insp. John Lane. "But at the same time, it becomes a very unsafe environment when you look at some of the clientele at that motel. The victims become victims."

For now, life goes on at Holiday Court. Motel regulars plot their escapes almost daily and occasionally make it out alive, but their addictions and isolation too often hold them in place.

"Pretty soon I'm going to get out from under this stuff," says a motel regular marked by scars, infections and misdeeds of a life of surreptitious injection-drug use, and you have to hope for everyone's sake that he makes it.

"As often as police are there, the Holiday Court has served a purpose in our city and probably at times saved lives," says Tysick. "The ones with burned bridges, the hardest to house - Holiday Court will give them a break."

"But at the same time, I've spent a lot of time there and seen some awful things. And if there's a hell on earth, it's got to be there." It never stops.

The record's over and a new one is on, the soundtrack to Fritz the Cat. The dictionary man pours me a vodka and orange juice and proffers one of the sandwiches we just bought at Subway. "Break bread with us," one of his friends urges.

And I'm ready to. But someone is at the door, urgent and worried. There has been a robbery, and now there's going to be a problem. I see a woman crouching behind the bushes across the parking lot like she's waiting for somebody to spirit her to safety.

"Trouble's coming," he tells me, ushering me out the door. "You'd better go."