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THE REHABILITATION OF HELMCKEN ALLEY



Helmcken Lane, a study in decrepitude leading to Bastion Square, is to get a major facelift with cash raised for the Festival of the Arts held annually in the square by the Bastion Square Revitalization Association. *John McKay/Times Colonist*

Major cleanup for Bastion

Arts festival provides cash and impetus for sprucing up walkways and lanes

BY MALCOLM CURTIS
Times Colonist staff

It's easy to miss Helmcken Alley as you walk through Victoria's Bastion Square.

A series of brick arches mark the entrance to the alley wedged between the historic Board of Trade and Customs House buildings that face the square in the heart of Old Town.

Poor lighting makes the alley particularly hard to notice at night. A forgotten byway, it has become a place for homeless people to sleep and for others to litter, urinate and defecate.

That should change as part of a \$320,000 facelift for Bastion Square that focuses on sprucing up walkways linking the popular tourist area with nearby streets. New banners, signs, better lighting and \$100,000 worth of public art are promised.

The project aims to improve Boomerang Court, Commercial Alley and the crosswalk area at Langley Street.

It is largely financed from cash raised from the Festival of Arts, held in the square annually by the Bastion Square Revitalization Association.

"The merchants have done a great job



Tourists and locals turn out for the Festival of the Arts in Bastion Square, principal source of funding for the square's facelift. *John McKay/Times Colonist*

in raising the money so we can do these projects," said Mayor Alan Lowe.

Boosting the appeal and safety of alleys around Bastion Square is a "work in progress," he acknowledged. Further improvements are expected as money becomes available.

The city is investing \$20,000 to replace the aging steel staircase linking the Yates Street parkade with Boomerang Court.

In the case of Helmcken Alley, the brick arches will be removed as part of the revitalization project approved Thursday by council. They will be replaced by

a simple iron arch. Six wall-mounted lights will improve safety at night.

The alley itself, which connects to a parking lot off Langley Street, will be resurfaced, and the owners of Custom House have agreed to replace an unattractive fire escape from the second floor of the building.

Access to the north end of the alley from the east end of the square will be eased by knocking down a retaining wall and building steps down to the alley entrance.

Improvements to Boomerang Court, a "backwater" between the parkade and Bastion Square, are designed to make it more lively and to discourage "campers" and drug users.

The court will be resurfaced and electrical outlets installed to encourage seasonal arts and cultural uses.

The changes were developed by Bastion Square merchants in consultation with city staff and architect Jim Kerr of Merrick Architecture. They follow recommendations by a working group of the Downtown Victoria Community Alliance to improve the vibrancy of Old Town's alleys, many of which have been neglected.