

By Charles Montgomery

Citizen Hern

Matt Hern has a plan to make our streets and neighbourhoods safe—but first, what does that word even mean?

Not pausing before breaking the law, Matt Hern marched out onto Commercial Drive with the assurance of a guy who knew that the truck had time to slow down. Hell, you could hear the engine grumbling, gearing down for the light up at Charles Street. He kept walking. If you didn't know him, you might have taken this as a typical act of East Van defiance: staring down the man, fighting the power. Yo. He sure looked the part. Buzzed head. Ripped jeans. A tattooed murder of crows flying up towards the pushed-back sleeves of his leather jacket. Grin like a post-pummel back-alley fighter.

But Hern wasn't out for a scrap. He was simply taking a calculated risk, one repeated thousands of times a day across this city. And a risk it certainly is. Last year, 46 souls met violent deaths in Vancouver. And despite all the recent hullabaloo about gang warfare, only half of the dead were victims of homicide. The other half met their maker out

here, on the street, crushed in or under a motor vehicle.

"We're afraid of the wrong fuckin' things," Hern said as he set his gaze on the truck driver's eyes—not to dare him, but to establish a relationship. The driver nodded. Good. So did Hern. The truck slowed, and Hern headed for the far curb, never missing a beat in his commentary on the dynamics of danger.

It's common wisdom that Vancouver has become a dangerous place. "The city is gripped by fear," said West Vancouver police chief Kash Heed, after last fall's spate of gang shootings. Transit cops have started packing heat. The mayor ordered his Civil City czar to crack down on crime and aggressive panhandling. And, a sure sign of security collapse, our Chinese consul-

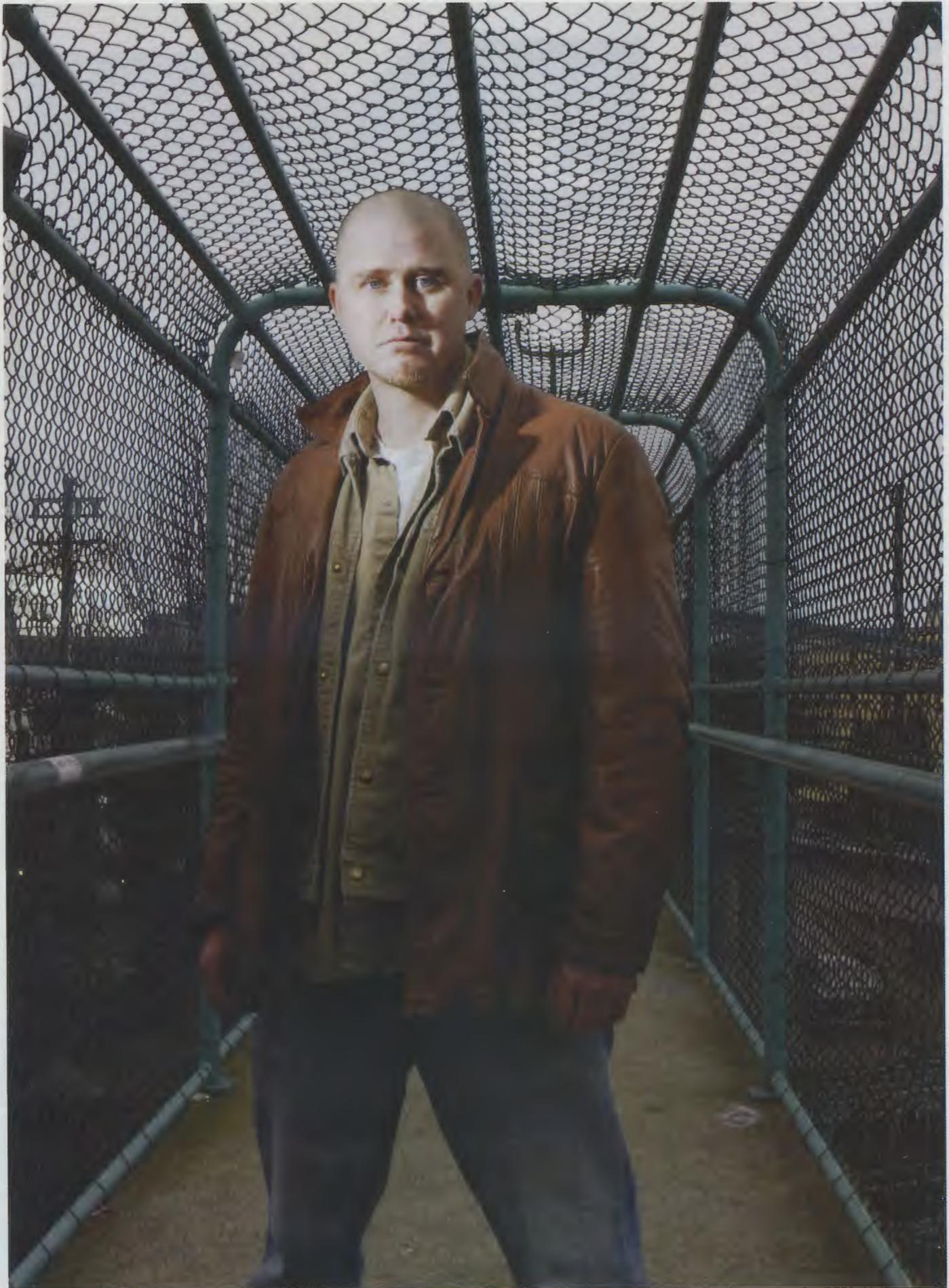
ate warned tourists to be vigilant when visiting our shores.

If you've caught the fear, if you wince every time your children leave the stoop, if you wish someone would make this town safer, take heart: Hern has a prescription. It doesn't look much like the Civil City handbook, however, and it doesn't call for more cops or cameras or Tasers. All we have to do is follow him

off the sidewalk. He wants us to walk, play, and hang out in the middle of streets usually reserved for traffic.

This is more than just fuzzy talk from the anarchist's cookbook. Behind Hern's ragged street uniform and potty mouth is a hefty volume of urbanist theory. He's a thrice-published author and a popular lecturer on education and urban studies at Simon Fraser University and UBC. He's the most charismatic trash talker in town, and he's used that gift to win support from city councillors, bureaucrats, and soccer moms for an experiment that will turn this city on its head.

If Hern's experiment is successful, if he can convince enough of us to follow him out into the street, it will change the way we see our thoroughfares, and each other. It may even make the city safer—which is ironic, given the title of Hern's new book:



Watch Yourself: Why Safer Isn't Always Better.

Hern's preoccupation with safety was sparked by the view of kids climbing trees on the grounds of North Vancouver's Windsor House School, where he worked in the 1990s. At a staff meeting, a teacher wondered about the school's policy on tree-climbing. Should there be a height limit? Should kids be allowed to climb only when supervised? Reasonable questions, but moot: a child had fallen from a tree and died in another North Van schoolyard the previous year, and the school district had outlawed the practice. "What could be more natural for kids than tree-climbing?" Hern says, tracing the lines on his scratched kitchen table on another winter morning. "This would have been unimaginable 20 years ago."

It got him thinking about how much things had changed since he was a kid on Vancouver Island. In Grade 1, he walked to school along the byways of North Saanich. Today, most parents wouldn't dream of letting young children walk the streets alone. Once, kids were expected to fall and hurt themselves on playgrounds. Now, playgrounds must meet strict standards or they become uninsurable—leaving some communities without. Once, schools routinely took kids on field trips. Now, the liability risk is too great.

Hern concluded that our entire culture has succumbed to a safety obsession ever amplified by insurance brokers, marketers, and politicians. From closed-circuit cameras and armed security guards to orange terror alerts on CNN and warnings on coffee cups and stairways, our lives have become exercises in quantifying and mitigating risk. Much of that risk is imaginary: the media portrays crime as an epidemic, when national and

local crime rates have actually fallen in recent years.

Last summer, Hern took his two daughters to Third Beach, only to be chastised by a lifeguard who reminded him of the municipal prohibition against beach balls. Parks bylaw #22 forbids playing with balls on Vancouver beaches. Frisbee-throwing is verboten, too. So is sitting on rock walls.

"When you question these rules, they say: 'What, aren't you concerned about your kids' safety?'" Hern says. "Safety has become a trump card that ends all kinds of conversations. It's the same with the security cameras everywhere. If you complain about them, people say, 'If you're doing nothing wrong, why are you afraid of security cameras?'"

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YOU COULD SAY that Matt Hern has a complicated relationship with risk. He's been kicking at the rules ever since his teens. Back then he was

back-talking teachers, getting thrown out of his prestigious private school, dressing like a jerk-off punk, and hot-wiring cars. His joyriding phase ended late one night when he and his pals rolled a stolen Buick. (They walked away before the cops showed.)

Two decades on, Hern's still taking chances. He personally bears the bulk of insurance liability for the Purple Thistle, an alternative youth centre he founded, even though he's handed off day-to-day management to the centre's youth. He rents a creaky old house just off Commercial, with no backyard fence, no alarm system, no double locks. He's let troubled kids and runaways occupy spare beds. A trapeze hangs in the living room. His two girls—aged 10 and 16—make the decision on how often they should attend school.

"Matthew still lives an entirely risky life," complains Hern's father, Riley, a retired child-protection officer, over the phone from North

To surf and protect

Paris takes back the streets every summer when this riverside roadway (inset) is covered in sand and those who seek it



Saanich. "He has no assurance about anything. No full-time job. He's almost 40 years old. He comes up with all these incredible projects and ideas, but most of us would consider our own welfare first. He's bringing up two kids—where's his rent going to come from? How's he going to pay for things?"

Yet, for all this precariousness, Hern's girls are thriving (to his chagrin, his 16-year-old daughter, Sadie, is a fastidious attendee at Templeton High), and his brash ideas have made him an internationally sought-after speaker. In the past year he's expounded on radical democracy, deschooling, and urbanism at universities and conferences from New York to Istanbul. And his "insecure" home glows with what a visitor can only describe as an immense feeling of ease and, well, security.

Real security, says Hern, can only come from relationships. He and his neighbours know and trust each other. They keep an eye on one another's property and kids. This is

Photos: Benoit Degiovanni, Sablier (inset)

enabled, partly, by density—there are plenty of eyes on the street—but also by lifestyle: he and his neighbours spend less time commuting (and, if the Drive stereotype is true, fewer hours working), so they have time to invest in everyday conviviality. They walk the 'hood. They really do pass time on front porches. It's New Urbanism without the Disney veneer.

"Some people go from their house to car to work to shopping without ever actually living in their neighbourhood," Hern says. "But the less you rip past in a car, the more you actually live here, the more you notice what's happening in your 'hood and the more you're likely to work to make it a better place."

Efforts to danger-proof the city actually have a way of making communities less safe, he argues, because they take responsibility out of individuals' hands. "If authorities always regulate and control the way we behave," he says, "it undermines our capacity to take care of each other, to negotiate risk on our own." With security guards patrolling our local streets, we get out of the habit of taking

care of each other. An example: Last Halloween, a couple of teenage girls in Santa tuques hauled a bus driver out of a trolley and pummelled her, right on Commercial Drive. Nobody on the street—which is now crawling with private security guards—stopped them. Presumably, they felt it was someone else's job. Finally some passengers came to the driver's aid.

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WE'RE ALMOST ALWAYS wrong when we calculate the risks of city life, insists Hern. Take driving the kids to school. Why do we do it? Because it's not safe for them to walk. But do we know where the danger lies? It's not in the legion of child abductors (almost all abductions are committed by parents). And it's certainly not in the flurry of bullets from the gang wars (gangsters generally shoot other gangsters).

"Your child probably faces the greatest risk of being hurt by another parent, rushing to drive their own kid to school," admitted Constable Tim Fanning, the

Vancouver Police Department's media liaison. Car accidents are the top cause of death for youth between 13 and 21 across the province. Of those 25 people who died here last year in car accidents, more than half were pedestrians.

That's Hern's point: we obsess over violent crime, when the greatest danger comes from regular folks driving their cars. "So why aren't *Vancouver Sun* columnists getting hysterical about cars?" Hern asked in a recent essay. "Why aren't there 90-point headlines screaming about this?" If we really wanted to tackle the main cause of death and injury among citizens, he argues, we'd pour money into traffic reduction.

Vancouver police learned this lesson in a curious way last summer. More than 70 closed-circuit cameras hadn't stemmed the rising tide of late-night drunkenness, punch-ups, and stabbings on Granville Street. So, on the August long weekend, the police tried banning cars from the strip. The effect was magical. Instead of having to break up brawls, police spent their nights posing for photos with happy



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revellers. All it took to turn the chaos into a love-in, said Fanning, was a bit more elbow room on the street.

Hern got his own car-bashing experiment rolling back in 2005. When he and his friends heard of B.C. transportation minister Kevin Falcon's plan to super-size Highway 1, they decided to fight back. On the morning of Father's Day, 2005, Hern and a couple hundred pals closed off eight blocks of Commercial Drive. Gradually, the cars drained away. Neighbourhood children were the first to leave the sidewalks, dashing out with balls and bikes. The Commercial Drive Car-Free Festival had begun. "We literally had no idea what would happen," recalls Hern. "When 25,000 people showed up, we were walking up and down the street grinning, amazed." The next year, twice that number attended. Last summer the party grew to two days. The Commercial Drive Business Society cringed at the anti-car message—requesting last year that the festival make room for a display of fuel-efficient cars—yet its members nearly double their receipts on car-free days.

For Hern, the street party was an exercise in participatory urbanism. With dozens of organizers and hundreds of volunteers, he says, the fest bound residents in common purpose, making the neighbourhood stronger in a way that no army of security guards could ever do. It also raised a rude middle finger at the province's highway scheme.

By international standards, the Drive fest is hardly radical. Paris covers a downtown freeway with sand for a month every summer. Bogotá, Colombia, turns its main streets into linear parks on Sundays, and London is planning to permanently close a few of the West End's busiest streets. These initiatives offer fuel for Hern's plan to wrestle streets back from cars right across Vancouver. He's cleaned up his vocabulary and won over planners, councillors, and neighbourhood leaders.

On a crisp evening this winter, he gathered a clutch of neighbourhood types in the West Side kitchen of Amy Robertson (wife of MLA Gregor Robertson). They nibbled on carrot cake, sipped Gato Blanco, and studied Hern's nine-point plan

to reclaim their streets. "If all you do is block off a street, you'll have succeeded," he reassured them. By the time the wine was finished, Hern had convinced them to hold simultaneous car-free days this June on Cambie and Main streets, and in Kitsilano, Marpole, and the West End.

The effect is viral. A week later, he'd charmed city councillor Suzanne Anton, the mayor's EcoDensity lieutenant and a budding climate activist. Anton enthused that she could help spread the fest to Kerrisdale and Killarney. "It's time we started reducing road capacity in the city," she said after meeting Hern.

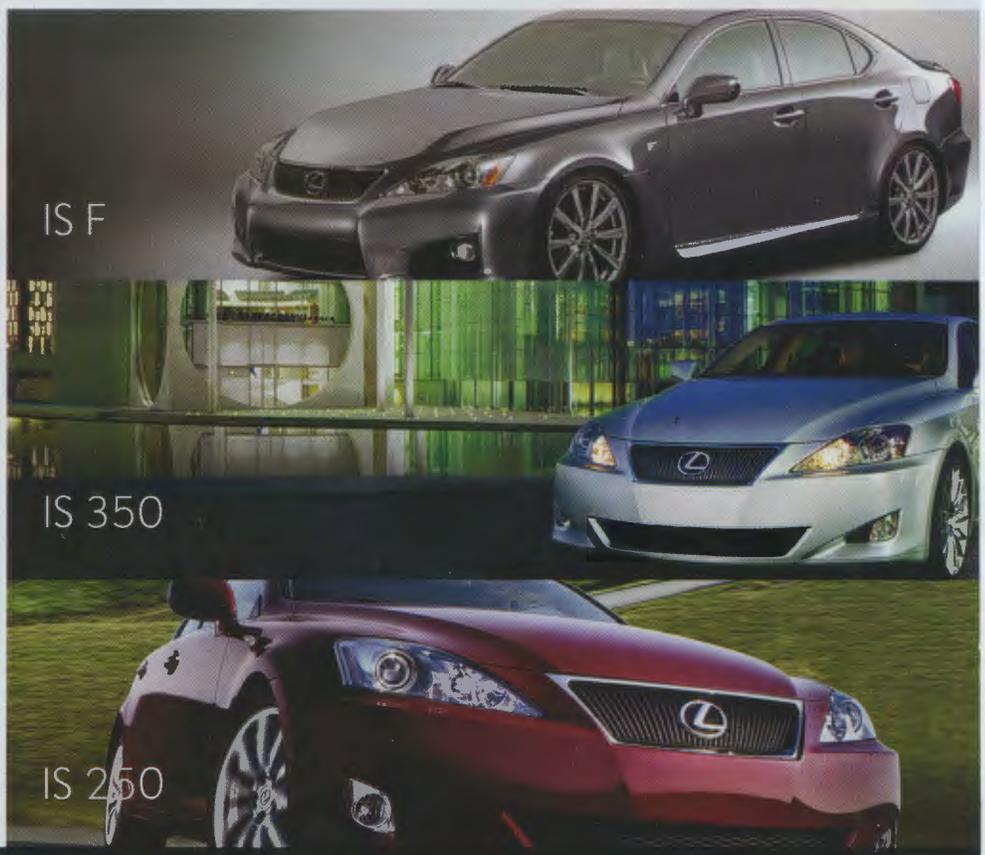
Bingo. Changing the way we divide and share our public spaces—that's the pot of gold at the end of Hern's festival rainbow. It would squeeze thousands of Vancouverites out of their cars, yes, and require a massive patch on our frayed transit system. And it would be excruciatingly painful for suburban commuters. But it would transform some of our streets back into places for living, where stepping from the curb would no longer be an act of risky extremism. **VM**

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