

HERITAGE Vancouver Newsletter



385 East Cordova
(Franciscan Sisters of the Atonement)



412 Alexander



414 Alexander



Original Charles Dickens School

Vancouver's Most Endangered Site

Ask any group of seasoned heritage advocates to identify the City's most endangered heritage 'site' and they'll reply: "The Vancouver Heritage Register!" Once a beacon of hope to heritage advocates, its stunted state now handicaps most efforts to preserve our historic legacy. Take, for example, the HV 2005 Top Ten Endangered Sites: at least six of the sites — ranging from Dickens Elementary School and the Roselawn Funeral Home to the two dozen orphaned Yaletown houses — are not in the Register. 385 Cordova Street, probably Vancouver's oldest in situ house, is also not there, nor are the two Alexander Street houses pictured above. Unbelievable!

How did this happen? The "Heritage Inventory," its original 1986 name, was welcomed as one of a group of significant milestones in the city's growth: until the mid-1970s, the Province, not the City, controlled urban heritage. In 1971, for example, designation of Gastown and Chinatown as historic sites occurred under the 1960 Provincial Archaeological and Historic Sites Protection Act. In 1974, however, the province amended the City's charter, allowing it to designate and protect its own heritage. In the early 1980s, Council initiated a Heritage Conservation Program to consist of 3 critical elements: a Heritage Inventory, to include not only buildings but also landscapes, monuments and archaeological sites "with heritage significance;" a Heritage Management Plan of incentives and protective measures; and a Public Education and Information Program. In 1994 the City acquired even more tools — particularly the 'Heritage Revitalization Agreement' — to protect and manage the City's heritage resources (expanded to include heritage landscapes and feature and fixtures of heritage interiors.) At this time, the Inventory became the "Register."

The Inventory/Register was, and still is, the bible — for City staff and the public alike — for keeping tabs on our heritage. The Register assigns each building an A, B or C category

according to four criteria: architectural, cultural/historical, and contextual value, and integrity. The City can then employ various heritage incentives to encourage owners to retain and rehabilitate buildings; these include the ability to relax zoning by-laws to permit more building area for an addition, to ease up on yard requirements, or to reduce the amount of required parking — all in an effort to make retaining the heritage building a more attractive option than demolition.

But sadly, what first seemed part of the solution has now become part of the problem. The Register has never come close to capturing the reality of our heritage stock. It was incomplete even in 1986 — resources (time and money) were so limited that the list was compiled by a windshield survey of consultants driving street by street through the city. As well, it's rumoured that a cap of 2500 was imposed on the total number of listings — the City worried that a complete listing would overwhelm heritage staff. Neighbourhoods received particularly short shrift — only 76 of First Shaughnessy's full complement of 360 heritage houses made it onto the list. Listings in other neighbourhoods were similarly cut back, while buildings that centre and focus a whole neighbourhood — such as the handsome Charles Dickens School in Cedar Cottage — were simply not evaluated. Not only schools, but also many Park Board sites are also missing.

Ensuring that the Register reflects reality seems an impossible dream. A systematic updating of the Register has never occurred. Even the sites listed in the 1990 "Recent Landmarks Inventory" — those post-1940 buildings that showcase Vancouver's signature innovative West Coast regional style — did not automatically become part of the Register (only 16 of roughly 100 were added). To add insult to injury, the Landmarks' cut-off date of twenty years meant that most post-1970 buildings didn't make it onto

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Burrard Bridge

It happens every year: Spring — and increased cycling and walking — puts Burrard Bridge on the front page. On March 2, the City held an open house to present the shortlisted design options for modifying the BB and connecting streets. Possible options include widening the bridge's sidewalks, using the curb lanes for cycling paths, suspending a cycling path underneath the bridge or simply adding a railing to the inside of both sidewalks. The cost of the options range from \$2 million or less to reduce traffic lanes or up to \$10 million to widen sidewalks at least three metres outside the bridge. Every option prompts debate.

Strong lobbying by Heritage Vancouver continues to influence the discussion. The public notice re: the Open House stated clearly that the intent of the project is “to provide additional capacity for pedestrians and cyclists in a way that respects the heritage elements of the bridge.” HV representatives at the Open House articulated our position on this “triumph of civic architecture” again: we absolutely oppose any proposal that calls for the widening of sidewalks to the outside — “anything,” says President Don Luxton, “that alters the historic relationship of the railings, of the piers, of the horizontal and vertical composition of the bridge at the road deck level.”

Charles Dickens School

Heritage Vancouver is still monitoring the threat to Charles Dickens School, as the proposal to replace the school moves forward. Neighbourhood opposition is building to the potential loss of this once elegant, but badly renovated early school. Comparison to its original appearance (see photo page 1) indicates that many original elements remain, even though painted over, and that much of the building's character could be restored.

Heritage Vancouver has been active on behalf of heritage schools. In January we once again sent a letter re: Dickens to City Hall urging decision makers to combine heritage retention with seismic upgrading; in February Don Luxton met with School Board officials and with School Trustees Reimer and Millsap and

the Top Ten Tour met with community group as part of the Top Ten Tour.

The province's announcement of substantial funding for the seismic upgrading of many of our older schools appears to be prompting a new openness at the School Board about discussing the issue of preservation of our landmark heritage schools. We look forward to further productive dialogue on this issue.

Evergreen Building

HV has written to Mayor Campbell and Council to express its deep concern “about the future of the above-noted landmark. We feel this building has cultural and architectural value to the city of Vancouver, and represents an outstanding example of the work of pre-eminent local architect Arthur Erickson. It was added to our Top Ten Endangered List this year based on the heightened risk it has been put under this past year.

Erickson designed the Evergreen Building as a mixed-use project for owner John Laxton. Primarily an office building, the Evergreen also has a residential component. In 2004, Laxton decided to convert the entire building to residential. As the economics of conversion required adding four storeys, Laxton retained Erickson to address compatibility with the original design. Erickson designed a light, 4-storey, glass and steel box — intended to resemble a lantern — on the roof of the existing building. This proposal was supported by the Heritage Commission, City staff and Council, but denied by the Development Permit Board, leaving Laxton with the impression that demolition is an easier solution than preservation. We understand that a development proposal for a new high-rise tower is forthcoming. This would, of course, involve demolition of the existing structure.

Completed in 1980, the building did not meet the 20-year age requirement of the 1990 Recent Landmarks Inventory, but it does now, and this demands a re-examination of this outdated document. Current development pressures should not overshadow the legacy that this building will have for future generations. City of Vancouver staff stated in September

2004 that the building “has heritage merit as a very good example of contemporary architecture and as an early example of Arthur Erickson's terrace building typology.”

City Council must act now to overturn the decision of the Development Board, to prevent demolition of this valuable piece of our architectural and cultural heritage. Following this, the City should negotiate with Mr. Laxton inclusion of the Evergreen Building in Vancouver's Heritage Register in recognition of its heritage value. Inclusion in the Register would provide some future protection and eligibility for heritage incentives.

While Heritage Vancouver would have preferred that the building to be left in its original state, we can support the addition of compatible storeys, if it means the preservation of this remarkable landmark. As the building was originally intended for partial residential use, we are not concerned about the current residential conversion, as the existing outdoor patio space would allow for minimal exterior alteration.

The Evergreen Building is a valuable part of Vancouver's modernist heritage. Buildings such as this explain a valuable aspect of Vancouver's history — a history no less important than a hundred years previous. Heritage Vancouver looks forward to a positive resolution to the adaptive reuse of this site, and to further discussion on updating the Heritage Register to include post-1970 sites.”

Gastown Sites:

Grand & Terminus Hotels

HV has written further to Mayor Campbell and Council to express continuing concern about “the façadist approach to the Grand Hotel, and the general implications for granting of heritage incentives for demolitions involving façade retention; our general concern regarding façade solutions and the negative precedent for conservation in Gastown and other historic districts; excessive additional density applied above existing cornice lines, and its impact on the heritage value of the subject buildings and area historic character generally; and lack of setback

for additional new construction. We do not believe these issues have been satisfactorily resolved, and may have implications for future applications.

Moreover, we wish to highlight the following two concerns regarding the fourth floor addition proposed above the Grand Hotel façade. First, this application continues to propose that the fourth floor be extended flush with the existing façade, ie. with no setback. The Council-approved guidelines for Gastown require setbacks for additional storeys. This is to ensure that new construction is invisible (or less visible) at street level. We are very concerned about the precedent that this proposal may have for future developments throughout Gastown. Second, we have concerns about the design of the fourth floor façade, and request that Council approval be conditional on further design development to ensure conservation standards and compatibility issues are addressed.”

Nurses’ Residence

In September 2004, HV expressed its serious concerns to City staff, and in January, an HV Director tried to contact the architect, to no avail. We have followed this up with an urgent letter to the development company, Concert Properties, requesting a meeting the members of the development team as soon as possible and proposing a joint tour of the building’s early-modern interiors.

Percy Underwood/‘Crime Lab’

HV has written Senior Heritage Planner Gerry McGeough “to draw urgent attention to the above-noted site, which includes a building in the ‘B’ evaluation category in the City’s Recent Landmarks’ Inventory. That building — designed in 1946 by Percy Underwood — is very important as one of Vancouver’s earliest examples of Modern commercial design, predating by ten years the Modernist building boom of mid-fifties.

Underwood is best known for his design of the Park Board administration offices on Beach Avenue. He designed the building at 1280 W. Pender as a photo studio for Jack Lindsay, later sharing space for his own architectural studio at 1280a. (Also part of this development application is the adjacent building at

1274 W. Pender, designed in 1952 as the architectural offices of Semmens and Simpson).

At 1280 W. Pender, Underwood took advantage of the wedge or apex created by the convergence of Pender and Melville Streets. The result is a miniature ‘flatiron’ profile evoking the prow or bridge of an ocean liner. The design is unusual for its sophisticated detail — particularly the sense of movement evoked through repeated horizontal mullions. At 1280a, where the site deepens somewhat, Underwood achieved maximum light penetration by glazing almost the entire Pender and Melville elevations, creating a fish-bowl effect that must have seemed radical at the time. The geometry of these elevations is simple and striking — a large floor-to-ceiling square framing a grid of smaller squares of equal dimension.

This site is very important to our Modernist legacy, and we are frankly surprised that it would not have been flagged in the City’s database. We are shocked to learn that the applicant is proposing a 10% increase in FSR through the transfer of heritage density from another site. This is inherently wrong: the City should not be providing heritage incentives from a donor site in order to facilitate the demolition of a heritage resource on a receiver site, particularly a site of this stature. If the applicant is interested in heritage incentives, the City should be negotiating incentives for the retention of the heritage on the subject site, notwithstanding the City’s interest in diminishing the density ‘bank’.

Ironically, the proposed development is being marketed as the ‘Flatiron’, perhaps in reference to the building it proposes to demolish. However, demolition could likely be avoided by siting the proposed tower further east on the development site, which comprises half of the 1200 block W. Pender starting at 1256. This would permit retention of the signature flatiron structure at the apex of the site. Heritage Vancouver would support further density and/or height relaxation as needed to address economic or urban design considerations.

This building is listed as one of Heritage Vancouver’s 2005 Top Ten Endangered Sites. We urge your immediate attention.”

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the Inventory list in the first place. The disturbing result is illustrated by the case of the imminently endangered Evergreen Building (1980) by Arthur Erickson. As well, despite the 1994 provision, the Register contains very few listings for historic interiors as interior designations are usually extracted during the development application process (e.g., in the Christ Church renovation, some interior features, but not all, were protected.) Gastown and Chinatown sites illustrate this omission — historic interiors are being gutted rather than rehabilitated owing to well meant but potentially disastrous incentives.

Heritage legislation allows for an increase in listings through application by the City or owners. But success here has been marginal. Although the City “may initiate designation of buildings of extraordinary merit,” this rarely happens — the process of researching old buildings is too time-consuming and expensive, and the legislation requires that owners be compensated. The intent and the reality are that designation is almost always voluntary: either by owner nomination or in return for incentives as part of the development process. Among individual homeowners or prospective buyers, confusion reigns about the benefits, if any, of being included in the Register, of being “listed” or “designated.” Simply being listed does not afford much protection (to the building) nor compensation (to the owner), but it does ensure a first warning — to City staff and groups such as Heritage Vancouver — of pending demolition. Designation offers both protection and compensation — the 1994 BC Heritage Act ensures that designation earns protection and compensation to the owner, either monetary or through zoning incentives and relaxations. Sixteen percent of the Register listings are designated sites, sporting the bronze Heritage Plaque.

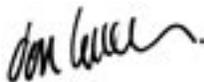
In fact, the number of listings is in net decline; there are presently 2149 buildings on the Register, 6% fewer than in 1986. We ask the City, therefore, to clarify its heritage intentions, to recognize that “demolition is forever”.

WORDS FROM THE PRESIDENT

Dear Members

Heritage Week has come and gone for 2005, but not without a significant contribution by Heritage Vancouver. In addition to our tour of Seaforth Armoury, we held our first ever Top Ten Endangered Sites Bus Tour. Well, picture our surprise when we were overwhelmed by the public response! We were covered by the major media — CBC Radio, the Vancouver Sun and the Province, and then CTV TV came along for the ride. This great event proves once again the importance of our mandate of heritage education and advocacy, and the public hunger for more information. A big round of applause to TRAMS, the Transit Museum Society.

Our society continues to grow in numbers and strength as we move forward with a renewed vision and mandate. Stay tuned for more information about the Board's strategic renewal process and some exciting new initiatives. We will keep you informed in our following newsletters.



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