

2008 TOP TEN ENDANGERED SITES



PRESS RELEASE

Welcome to the eighth annual Heritage Vancouver Top Ten Endangered Sites. Released during National Heritage Week, our Top Ten list is anticipated by many as the 'word on the street' for the city's threatened heritage resources. The list includes sites in danger of demolition or serious alteration, or in some case horrible neglect. Each of these sites also illustrates a larger pattern of danger to heritage, based on inaction, conflicting agendas or bureaucratic policies.

Our list of ten cannot begin to do justice to the scores of heritage buildings in harm's way: the explosive real-estate development market exerts mounting pressure on our vulnerable historic places, and hastily-wrought policy initiatives such as the City of Vancouver's EcoDensity initiative could do more harm than good. Meanwhile, opportunities for preservation are missed because the City has frozen density transfers pending a policy review. But the malaise runs deeper: As the City fiddles with density transfers, its outdated heritage incentives are increasingly inadequate to address the economic challenges of heritage rehabilitation. The promised Heritage Register Upgrade gave a glimmer of hope, but it's now on the back burner indefinitely because funding was diverted to the density transfer review. Many sites may not survive the wait, and others have already bit the dust, most notably the destruction of the Moderne landmark 'Fido' building (1948 Colliers Showroom) at 450 West Georgia.

Among repeat sites from last year's list are Burrard Bridge - and the still-proposed desecration by cantilevered outriggers - and Vancouver's schools, headed one-by-one for demolition as part of a seismic 'upgrade' program. Surprise, surprise, a new host of landmarks are endangered, including the houses of lower Mt. Pleasant, the Dal Grauer Substation, the York Theatre, and Erickson's Robson Square - which could soon be trapped under a giant clamshell.

1 | BURRARD BRIDGE

CONSTRUCTED 1932

Now over 75 years old, the venerable Burrard Bridge is one of Vancouver's true landmarks. This stunning structure, the ceremonial entrance to both downtown Vancouver and False Creek, has been evaluated as an 'A' on the City's Heritage Register. The Burrard Bridge, with its sculptural details, including intricately decorated towers and entrance pylons with flaming torches - a tribute to Canadian World War I Prisoners of War - is one of the only pure Art Deco bridges in the world. Opened in 1932, the bridge has remained substantially intact, except for the removal of its original light fixtures.

The current City of Vancouver's re-purposing initiatives threaten to significantly compromise the Bridge's original design. For years the City has been seeking ways to better accommodate cyclists; many options have been on the table including lane closures, improved use of the Granville Street Bridge, a separate cyclist and pedestrian bridge, and a bikeway under the bridge. Despite Heritage Vancouver's support for all these options, the City has remained steadfast in selecting the widening of the Burrard Bridge at the roadbed level as its only option. Heritage Vancouver, Heritage Canada and worldwide Art Deco organizations have consistently spoken with one voice in opposing this option.

The City will vote as early as April on a consultant's proposal to widen the bridge by about twenty feet with outriggers and shiny new metal railings, marooning the landmark entry pylons in a sea of pavement. If you have trouble imagining the impact of outriggers, picture "your grandmother with a stainless steel hula-hoop over her ball gown". It is time for Vancouverites to let our city councilors know that we are opposed to spending at least \$50 million to destroy one of our most iconic works of art.

2 | VANCOUVER SCHOOLS – GENERAL GORDON ELEMENTARY

2896 W. 6TH AVE (1911-13; 1922-25) AND MANY OTHERS

One of the most striking elements of Vancouver's Heritage landscape is the sprinkling of landmark heritage schools throughout the city. Each has its own unique story, harbours shared memories and is cherished by members of its community. Many of these treasured schools will soon be disappearing- General Gordon Elementary and Dickens are both slated for demolition in 2008 with more to come in the near future.

General Gordon's history is as old as the neighbourhood. The original section was built at West 6th and Bayswater in 1911-13, then the western edge of residential development. The red and yellow brick building – an example of Edwardian classicism in school design – features pediment-like gables, decorative brick quoins, Renaissance-inspired pilasters and multiple-paned wood-sash windows all contributing to the school's 'B' listing on the Heritage Register and its importance as a neighbourhood landmark.

Why all of a sudden are many of Vancouver's heritage schools in the endangered category? The province has initiated a seismic mitigation program which doesn't distinguish between heritage and non-heritage buildings. Unfortunately its funding formula favours new construction over rehabilitation. It has become abundantly clear that the new schools will have less community and amenity space and shorter life spans. They have none of the landmark status or architectural character of what they are replacing. Heritage Vancouver is involved with a number of community groups in an initiative to bring the Provincial Government, the Vancouver School Board and the City of Vancouver together to find a solution to achieve the two important goals of seismic mitigation and heritage preservation, which are not mutually exclusive.

3 | ROBSON SQUARE COMPLEX

800 HORNBY (1973-79)

Robson Square is home to the Arthur Erickson-designed provincial buildings that put Vancouver on the map. Built over six years starting in 1973, Erickson's design for the Three-Block Project known as Robson Square employs concrete and glass as the predominant building materials – the forms are simple and rectilinear, employing verticals, horizontals and terraces, softened by the pools and green spaces designed by renowned landscape architect Cornelia Oberlander. Envisioned by Erickson and Oberlander as a "linear urban park, importing nature into the city" and pioneering one of the first major uses of green roofs in North America, Robson Square won the prestigious American Society of Landscape Architects President's Award of Excellence in 1979, where the jury commented on the "extraordinary integration of landscape architecture with architecture--consistent and coherent." The complex is internationally recognized as a masterwork of modernist architecture.

The Provincial Government recently announced plans to build a giant wooden “clamshell” spanning Robson St. between Hornby and Howe. The clam is to provide a covered ‘live site’ showcasing BC wood products during 2010 Olympics and remain after the Games as a permanent ‘legacy’. The massive wooden arch, high enough for buses to pass under, would have an enormous physical and visual impact not only on Robson Square, but also on the Art Gallery, a National Historic site. The proposal bears no relationship to the form, material or design ethos of Arthur Erickson’s architectural masterpiece. This would be an urban design mistake of epic proportion.

Heritage Vancouver urges the Provincial Government to provide a more architecturally sensitive and functionally appropriate open space for the 2010 Olympics on the Georgia Street side of the Vancouver Art Gallery. This is the only portion of Mr. Erickson’s three-block-long scheme that was never completed. His concept was for a largely hard-surfaced plaza — adapting itself readily to multiple uses, ranging from concerts to demonstrations to ethnic fairs. The completion of this plaza would be a fitting legacy to the Olympics and to Arthur Erickson.

4 | HISTORIC AREAS; GASTOWN, HASTINGS, CHINATOWN

In 1971, The Province designated Gastown and Chinatown as “Historic Areas”. In 2002 the city adopted the Gastown Heritage Management Plan to retain the heritage character of Gastown including the distinctive sawtooth streetscape profiles and height limits of 75 feet. To defray some of the costs of restoration, building owners were given incentives - later extended to Chinatown and Hastings Street. One of the incentives “the transfer of density to sites outside of the Historic Areas” proved to be hugely successful – apparently too successful for the City of Vancouver - and a freeze was placed on this very effective restoration tool in 2007. The city has since announced a Historic Precinct Height Study to identify specific areas and sites in the historic precincts where additional height might be considered. The City’s EcoDensity Charter proposes increased building heights in Gastown, Hastings and Chinatown districts and the extension of the transfer of density to include “Green projects”, at a time when the city is worried that the density bank already contains too much density. If these initiatives go ahead, the weakening of the transfer of density tool and the increase in heights, they will effectively gut the Gastown Heritage Management Plan and more insidiously could destroy the character of Vancouver’s historic neighbourhoods. It is ironic that these threats to our historic neighbourhoods are coming less than a year after of the city received a Provincial Heritage award for excellence in heritage restoration as embodied in the Heritage Building Rehabilitation Program. It is equally ironic that as cultural tourism is increasing by 15% annually, Vancouver is introducing measures that could effectively destroy our historic areas.

5 | DAL GRAUER SUBSTATION

970 BURRARD STREET (1953-54)

A local landmark, B.C. Hydro’s Dal Grauer Substation is one of the great early works of the Modern movement in Vancouver, and an ‘A’ on the Recent Landmarks Inventory.

In 1953-4 the BC Electric Company hired young architect Ned Pratt and artist B.C. (Bert) Binning, to develop a light, open design that deeply integrated art and architecture. Embodying the Modernist form-follows-function philosophy, the entire Burrard Street elevation featured a floor-to-ceiling glass and steel curtain wall, exposing electrical machinery, staircases, and other functional elements set against a backdrop of bright primary colours. Pratt and Binning created, in essence, a three-dimensional ‘canvas’ which, when viewed through the exterior glass and steel grid, has been said to resemble a Mondrian De Stijl painting. In period nighttime photos, the glass exterior membrane becomes invisible, the coloured backdrop glowing with light in a celebration of electrical consumption. Notably, when the same architects were commissioned to design the adjoining BC Electric office tower (1957), the design philosophy was extended to the 23-storey glass and aluminum curtain wall that, famously, radiated like a night-time beacon with all of its office lights deliberately left blazing.

In the 1980s, when a transformer explosion damaged the facade, the plate glass was replaced by plexiglass panels, which rapidly became dull and semi-opaque, compromising the original design. Although consultants have prepared a restoration plan for the building, the restoration work itself appears to be stalled. Although not endangered by demolition, this neglected landmark sits demoralized and obscured, a very sad remnant of its former glory as a civic icon.

Heritage Vancouver encourages BC Hydro to take the Dal Grauer building out of the dark and once again create a flood of light and colour on Burrard Street. What a fitting contribution that would be to the 2010 Olympics.

6 | YORK (ALCAZAR) THEATRE

639 COMMERCIAL DR. (1913)

The York Theatre holds a significant place in the history of Vancouver theatre. It is the only purpose-built theatre with a fly tower and proscenium stage on the east side of the city and one of only two or three such early theatres left in Vancouver. Built in 1913 as “the Alcazar” the theatre is an early design of budding architect John McCarter who, with his later partner George Nairne, designed the iconic Marine Building.

As home of the Vancouver Little Theatre Association for 54 years, the York has great historical and cultural significance. Over the years, up-and-coming actors such as Dave Broadfoot, Don Gerrard, Joy Coghill and Bruno Gerussi graced its stage.

According to a survey conducted by the Coal Harbour Arts Complex Society, there are 915 potential uses annually for a theatre in the size range of the 500-seat York. At a time when the City of Vancouver has a serious lack of performance space, the York was purchased by a developer who plans to demolish it and build a rowhouse complex. Realizing that Vancouver cannot afford to lose yet another of its historic theatres, a group of community members met to come up with a solution. The Group, led by Tom Durrie of “Save the York Society”, and other stakeholders including Heritage Vancouver, recognized that a community-based solution for saving and restoring the York Theatre is the only way to go. The group has put out a request for someone in the community to buy the York and create a theatre that will contribute to the cultural development of the city. The future of the York is still uncertain.

7 | FIREHALL NO. 15

3003 EAST 22ND AT NOOTKA (1913)

From its position on a prominent rise in this eastside neighbourhood, Firehall 15 commands a view of the city and a special place in the hearts of local residents. This well-loved community landmark is known for its striking hose tower, complete with brass pole, its Craftsman detail and distinctive bracketed eaves, its handsome interior woodwork and its ornate pressed-metal ceilings. When talk began some time ago of replacing the 85 year old Firehall #15, local groups and community members banded together and worked tirelessly to convince city council to preserve this city-owned heritage building that is filled with community memories.

Victory for the community came on July 20, 2006. Council voted 10-1 to preserve and restore the firehall on its current site and incorporate it into the new firehall. The celebration was short lived.

In an about-face on March 1, 2007, city council voted 6-4 to demolish the building. The old firehall currently sits in political limbo waiting for a change of heart from one city councilor to breath new life into its deteriorating frame. A 2/3 council majority is required to overturn a previous council decision, and this technicality means that the building cannot be demolished until someone changes their mind.

Heritage Vancouver urges city council to “do the right thing” and restore its own heritage building. This is a great opportunity for the city to become an exemplary heritage role model and a leader in the field of heritage conservation by preserving this community landmark.

8 | ZERO BLOCK W. HASTINGS STREET

44 – 68 W HASTINGS (1900; 1904)

The north side of the zero block W. Hastings is one of the city's most intact historic streetscapes – completely unprotected save the 'B'-listed Paris Block – a good-news rehabilitation project currently underway. Other buildings in this fascinating streetscape include the 1906 Army & Navy building -- its floor-to-ceiling continuous windows an important forerunner of modernism – the delightfully quirky Palace Hotel at 33-37 W. Hastings and the Save-On-Meats building better known for its landmark 'flying pig' neon sign.

The south side of this block was once a glorious location boasting the opulent Pantages Theatre (long since demolished and now home to a special needs residential facility) and the twin National and Columbia Theatres (now a huge vacant lot the aftermath of arson). The three remaining historic buildings, the 1900 McRae/Hall building, the 1904 Furuya Block and the 1904 Forbes & Van Horne Building have seen better days. Archival photos show handsome brick facades, now hidden behind layers of corrugated metal, stucco and cheap paint jobs.

The City of Vancouver did not flag sites on the historic Hastings Corridor to ensure that options for heritage retention would be considered, until December 2007. By this time development plans for 44-68 W. Hastings were well advanced, and a developer had already assembled development sites including these three historic properties. This, coupled with the city's lack of restoration incentives puts these buildings at imminent risk of demolition.

Heritage Vancouver anticipates the coming change in the Downtown Eastside with both fear and anticipation — new investment is urgently needed before decay becomes terminal, yet how many of these precious streetscapes will be retained if the economics of retention are outbid by the economics of redevelopment?

9 | LOWER MOUNT PLEASANT

HOUSES AT 144 E. 6TH (1888); 304 W. 5TH (1905) AND OTHERS

Shadowed by towering construction cranes above the athletes village languishes remnants of one of Vancouver's oldest neighbourhoods. The present commercial/industrial area bounded by Cambie Street, West Second Avenue, Main Street and Broadway, has its origins as a workers neighbourhood serving the water-based industries of southeast False Creek. In the late 1880s, the first houses appeared, giving birth to the City's first neighbourhood south of False Creek. In the ensuing decades, industrial uses crept southward, the area declined, and in the 1950s, property-owners successfully petitioned City Council to re-zone the neighbourhood for light industrial development. Since then, most of the early houses have been replaced by nondescript commercial buildings, but fascinating pockets of the old neighbourhood hang on, including turn-of-the-century houses, apartments and diners.

Typical of the area's endangered stock is the 1888 Lindsay Residence, a Victorian at 144 East Sixth Avenue near Main Street, and possibly the oldest extant house outside of downtown. Built just two years after the Great Fire, the old monarch is vacant and boarded-up, and sits adjacent to a former scrap-yard for sale as a development site. Neglected and stuccoed over, clues to her former glory are still visible, including triple-assembly windows, and a shingled main gable with lunette window and original fascia details. Peel off the stucco, and the original wood siding and other hidden details will still be there.

Currently, the City is conducting a comprehensive heritage evaluation as part of the Mount Pleasant Community Plan. We encourage the city to also evaluate the industrial area of Mount Pleasant to facilitate the conservation of these important remnants of the city's early development.

HEATLEY BLOCK

684 E. HASTINGS (1931; HOUSES 1893 & 1898)

The Heatley Block, a well-loved Strathcona landmark, houses a cluster of local businesses cherished by the neighbourhood. The main structure, built in 1931 at the southwest corner of East Hastings & Heatley, is a stucco-clad commercial/residential building. A handsome example of vernacular commercial architecture, the structure is remarkably intact, with pressed metal cornices, crenellated parapets, divided double-hung wood sash windows, original signage and decorative details. The building contributes to the historic fabric of the neighbourhood as one of the last remaining character buildings on a particularly bleak section of East Hastings. On the same property, but around the corner at 405 – 419 Heatley are two very early houses. Covered with asbestos siding, one of the houses, with an intact Victorian bay window, dating from 1893 and 1898.

The Heatley Block and these two very old houses are not on the City's Heritage Register. The City of Vancouver recently purchased the Heatley Block with the intention of demolishing it to build a badly needed new community library. Heritage Vancouver encourages the city to incorporate the new branch library into the Heatley block. With the adaptive reuse of the block, the city would be able to give this community what it wants; the preservation of one of its valued heritage landmarks and the creation of a new community library. We also encourage the city to proceed with the update of the Heritage Register, currently on hold, to ensure that restorable gems hidden under later asbestos and other sidings are identified and preserved.