

Heritage Vancouver & Vancouver Community Forums
Does Heritage Matter: the Burrard Building at St. Paul's Hospital
Thursday, November 16, 2006, 7:00 pm, Vancouver Museum

Following a welcome by Heritage Vancouver President, **Don Luxton**, moderator **Roger Chilton** reviewed the format for the evening's forum and asked the Presenters to address two questions: Is there value in preserving heritage buildings and why or why not? and What is your idea for the future of the Burrard Building and why?

In response to the first question, **Ray Spaxman**, former City of Vancouver director of planning offered two quotes that he felt addressed the issue. In 1986, Paul Goldberger wrote:

“It is no longer a radical idea to talk of saving older buildings, no longer an odd viewpoint to suggest that in many old buildings there may be whole new lives waiting to begin, and that those lives may even turn out to be more profitable economically than the buildings' previous ones. In the last decade the preservation and rehabilitation of older structures have become part of our culture. We have discovered – miracle of miracles – that we like older things, that they bring not only a degree of immediate visual pleasure that much modern architecture cannot offer, but also the deeper and more subtle gratification of a sense of connection with the movements of time.”

And on the question of preserving old buildings, John Brademas wrote:
“When we thoughtlessly obliterate the buildings and places of our past, we demonstrate our insensitivity to what we were, a disdain for what we in part still are. By saving, and adopting for reuse – the best of our buildings, we link the communities of today to the foundations of our culture.”

In response to the second question, and observing on the exterior features and functions of the Burrard Building, Ray was curious about the absence of conversation within the community and uninformed about what it may want. There were obviously many choices. Should the building be retained completely or partially, torn down, moved, or treated like wallpaper and become a facade? He noted that fortunately there now exist straightforward city policies that give viable incentives for owners to keep and rehabilitate heritage buildings without incurring economic loss.. And if the hospital were to move, he saw the possibilities for new uses of the heritage building that would be compatible and supportive of the West End..

Gerry McGeough, senior heritage planner with the City of Vancouver, equated heritage preservation to Maslow's hierarchy of needs and noted how heritage meets a number of human needs: it provides a sense of belonging that anchors us and carries something from the past that gives us continuity and informs us about our values.

To remove the Burrard Building would be a great disservice to what it has done and does for the community, and a way must be found to retain as much of the structure as possible. Gerry saw

peoples' association with the building as quite profound and felt that community discussion was necessary to encourage a balance between keeping the historical elements in a manner that would also be economically sound. He invited everyone to keep working together to find the best solution.

For **Neil MacDonnell**, chief architect with Providence Health Care, the answer was simple: heritage *does* matter. Established in 1843 in Montreal, the Sisters of Providence came to Vancouver in 1894 when it opened a 25-bed compassionate care hospital. At PHC, heritage drives them forward and culture and history drives their interests.

Neil noted how PHC has worked to maintain the heritage building with new roofs and partial upgrades, but that significant problems remain, including the need for seismic upgrading. PHC's older buildings are at 10% Seismic code capacity and the 'new' towers at 55% Code capacity To address the need for 30% more space to handle projected increases in volumes, for future flexibility, and to meet increased standards of care, he highlighted the challenges of doing this at the current location. If the hospital were to be relocated, he could see the Burrard Building serving such interests as senior and social housing, research space, and specialty clinics, as well as Primary care and Urgent Care.

While participating in a recent march to honour veterans, **Lorne Mayencourt**, MLA Vancouver-Burrard, was impressed by how much history one can see along Burrard Street and across the Burrard Bridge, another heritage structure. A firm believer in preserving heritage, Lorne feels that the ability to walk up to these structures and touch them and feel their history is important. For many people living in the area, there is awareness and understanding of what the hospital has meant to the community for the past 100 years.

Lorne invited the audience to look beyond the bricks because the question goes much deeper than that. For people who live in the West End, they see it as the historical entrance to a new and better state-of-the-art health care facility that would build upon its reputation in areas like the Centre for Excellence on AIDS that has had world-wide impact for people living with AIDS.

For **Robert Lemon**, architect, the conversation about the Burrard Building began in the early 90's and he noted how people often understand intuitively how historic buildings add value to the city. Layers of history and character can be seen in our heritage buildings that often echo the growth of the city and enrich its symbolic nature.

On a recent walk around the site's two city blocks, Robert saw the opportunity to transform the campus for medical purposes "with a little bit of surgery" that could lead to a fresh face for the structure. The potential to create a new space and introduce facilities and services that would relate health care to its historic function is very real.

During the Questions & Answer session that followed the presenters' answers to the two key questions, participants learned about a variety of complex issues affecting the site, health care, the value of heritage in Vancouver, financial considerations, community and other interests, and

the sometimes conflicting interests these issues present. There were specific discussions regarding issues impeding Providence Health Care's ability to expand operations at the current location; failed attempts to purchase the property at the corner of Davie and Burrard and the difficulty of building a tower on the north east corner of the property due to City of Vancouver view cone regulations and shadowing that would impact Nelson Park.

For this particular audience it seemed evident that heritage does matter and that public consultation was required at the earliest rather than as an add-on later in the decision-making process. As evidence of the value of the forum, presenters and participants lingered and continued in lively conversations – clear testimony to the intent of the partnership between Heritage Vancouver and Vancouver Community Forums.

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Gail Brown, WECAN member of the organizing group for the Does Heritage Matter forum.
November 20, 2006