

## A well-loved landmark on the block

The threatened demolition of the 77-year-old Heatley Block in Strathcona pits residents against the Vancouver Public Library

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It was no accident that Heritage Vancouver included the 1931 Heatley Block in Strathcona on its annual list of top 10 endangered historic sites in the city. In fact, it was the opening salvo in a fight by heritage experts and residents to save a valued site in a heritage neighbourhood.

It's a battle that highlights the tensions between old and new in one of Vancouver's oldest districts — and pits citizens against the board of the Vancouver Public Library.

Two months ago, the city's real estate department bought the commercial block at the corner of Heatley and Hastings, along with two adjacent houses dating to the late 19th-century, with a view to redeveloping the site for a new branch of the Vancouver Public Library.

Don Luxton, president of the non-profit Heritage Vancouver, says that he heard about the possible purchase early in the year, and that including Heatley Block on the endangered list in March was a deliberate attempt to save the property from demolition.



[Enlarge Image](#)

Claudine Michaud is leading a residents' group fighting to safeguard the Heatley Block in Strathcona, one of the city's oldest neighbourhoods. (JENNIFER ROBERTS/THE GLOBE AND MAIL)



"There were rumours that the building would be demolished for a new library," he recalls.

"When we evaluated the site, it was clearly of heritage value to the area, and obviously at risk, as it is not listed on the city's Heritage Register. So it was included at the last minute as one of our top 10 sites."

The village-like Strathcona neighbourhood, tucked between Chinatown and the Downtown Eastside, is home to some of Vancouver's oldest buildings.

Its residents have fought to protect the area from redevelopment since the 1960s, when they halted construction of a major highway that would have eradicated both Strathcona and Chinatown.

"Strathcona is known as Vancouver's first neighbourhood," Mr. Luxton notes.

"It was part of the very earliest settlement of Vancouver and provided housing for many people who worked in the downtown and in the port area."

Once known mainly for crime and drugs, Strathcona is now a neighbourhood in transition, a mix of artists, ethnic groups, and young professionals drawn to an urban lifestyle in an arts-and-crafts home.

The area is remarkable for its intact rows of late 19th-century and early 20th-century architecture, unique to the city. Many of the houses have been painstakingly restored by their owners.

Although Strathcona is just a stone's throw from the gritty Downtown Eastside, earlier this year it saw its first \$1-million-plus home sale, a sign of the area's growing popularity.

John Atkin, an expert on Vancouver history and head of the Strathcona Residents Association, says that because the area is experiencing significant change, it's crucial that city officials look at long-term plans for heritage buildings such as the Heatley Block.

"The city didn't do its due diligence," says Mr. Atkin, author of several books on Vancouver heritage.

"They didn't take a look at the complex and say: 'Two old heritage houses and a character building ... hmm, this might mean something to the community. We should do some checking.'"

The Vancouver Public Library does see the value of the Heatley Block, specifically its location. Officials say the site is the perfect spot for a new, 12,000-square-foot branch library that would also offer services such as English classes and employment training.

But those ambitious plans would mean demolishing the two-storey Heatley Block, which has apartments above four stores, along with two neighbouring houses — among the oldest in the city — dating to 1889 and 1898.

"The people who live [in Heatley Block], the majority, feel very passionately about wanting to stay there," says Claudine Michaud, head of a hastily organized residents' group, the Heatley Block Preservation Society.

"It's got tons of character and it was well kept by the owners," she says, adding: "The way this purchase was done, it was very much below the radar."

The residents' group has papered Strathcona with posters to save the Heatley Block and acquired about 800 signatures on a petition, which it presented to the city.

The Vancouver Public Library has been working toward a new branch in the area for several years. In 2004, Ms. Michaud took part in community consultations on the subject.

"What came out of that was to place a library as close as possible to Strathcona Elementary School," she recalls. "And also, no heritage buildings would be demolished in order to build a new library."

A year later, the library's board of trustees received financing to spend \$2.5-million on purchase of land for a new branch, but does not yet have money for the building itself.

The VPL wants to build a branch that would serve Strathcona, Chinatown and the Downtown Eastside. Currently, residents use a 1,500-sq.-ft. library inside Lord Strathcona Elementary School on East Pender Street; the school's library, complete with tiny chairs, doubles as a VPL branch.

Heatley Block supporters argue that the ideal location for the library is on the grounds of Lord Strathcona; it is the city's oldest school, is attached to a community centre, and is already familiar to residents as being the site of the public library branch.

"If the new library branch were situated there, it would become a central hub for the whole area. Everything already takes place there," Mr. Atkin argues.

Shannon Daub, a trustee of the VPL and chair of its community relations committee, sympathizes with those who want to safeguard the Heatley Block and the 19th-century houses.

"If there were a development in my neighbourhood where we felt like we were going to lose one of our few valuable buildings, I would have concerns too," says Ms. Daub, who works in the heritage Dominion Building downtown and regularly cycles to work through Strathcona.

"But as trustees, we work with the community consultation process and the city's real estate department, and I understand the search for the site was quite challenging," she says.

"We were quite excited when we heard we had a site, and frankly, we weren't aware that there were [heritage preservation] concerns with Heatley Block at that time. But we want to address those concerns," Ms. Daub says.

To that end, city and library officials met with residents' and community groups earlier this month to talk about the plans and will get together again next month.

City librarian Paul Whitney says there is also a plan to do a "statement of significance" on the heritage aspect of the Heatley Block and the two smaller buildings, examining their architectural value as well as their worth to the community.

Mr. Atkin says that's welcome news for the Heatley Block — and for residents of Strathcona.

"It's quite a good thing, because it will give everyone something to measure the building with. All of this comes about because of what the residents have said."

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### **Here is how Heritage Vancouver described the Heatley Block in its 2008 Top Ten Endangered Sites report:**

"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, dates from 1889."

**Source:** *Heritage Vancouver website*

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### **The heritage register**

The Heatley Block and two 19th-century houses under threat of demolition in Strathcona are not listed on Vancouver's Heritage Register. While their omission raises concerns for many, it doesn't surprise local experts.

The register, compiled in 1986, is the backbone of the city's heritage program, says Don Luxton, of the non-profit group Heritage Vancouver.

When a building is placed on the register, it is flagged as having heritage significance. It is not legally protected from demolition, but demolition can be delayed, allowing for negotiation to save the building if it is proven to be of significance. Buildings that are not on the register have no such protection.

The register has not been updated in the past 20 years and overlooks many historic buildings and sites, Mr. Luxton says. For the most part, a building is added to the register only when its owner does so voluntarily.

"Heritage Vancouver has been calling for many years for an update of the Heritage Register," Mr. Luxton says. The question of how to do that is linked to other heritage initiatives that will go before City Council on Oct. 2; his group will be on hand to push for the update.

"The Heritage Register is a pointless document now," agrees heritage expert and author John Atkin. "It was [first] done as a 'windshield survey' by people who drove across the city looking at buildings that could possibly be heritage. The idea ... was to capture a good sense of what was out there, but then it would be refined into a much more detailed list. And then the list was never modified from that general catchall. Great whacks of stuff got missed the first time."

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