

# HERITAGE

# Vancouver

## Newsletter



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## 2005 Top Ten Endangered Sites

This year marks publication of the fifth annual Heritage Vancouver Top Ten Endangered Sites. This is a celebration of sorts — our “Top Ten” list is now recognized as an authoritative overview of the city’s threatened heritage resources. As well, its effectiveness has prompted the sincerest form of flattery, and we welcome New Westminster Heritage Preservation Society’s publication of its own Top Ten list.

It was difficult to keep the list to ten: the explosive real estate development market is placing even designated sites once thought safe — like Chinatown and Gastown — in extreme jeopardy. That designated heritage sites are on our list is cause for great concern, as is the state of the Heritage Register — itself endangered and urgently requiring resuscitation! The sites finally chosen are either already in critical danger or likely to be so shortly. This year’s No. 1 is a new entry — the houses of Yaletown. Woodward’s remains on our list as Number 2, while another new entry, Arthur Erickson’s Evergreen Building, is in third place.

### 1. The Houses of Yaletown

Going, Going, Gone ... With booming redevelopment in Downtown South, anything left standing from the city’s earliest development will soon be splinters. This part of downtown was initially nick-named “Yaletown” as the original CPR employees came from the former shops at Yale in the Fraser River canyon. Some workers literally moved house, loading their houses in Yale onto flatcars or barges and setting them on new foundations near False Creek. The community clustered around the CPR’s roundhouse and yards at the foot of Davie Street, where Vancouver’s Great Fire in 1886 had started when brush was being cleared for railyard construction. Rebuilding was immediate and, since workers preferred to live close to work to save money, modest wooden frame houses soon lined the streets and a lively community established itself. Sadly, only a few of these houses remain; best known is the bright yellow George Leslie House at 1386 Hornby Street — it will remain but be overwhelmed

by an enormous tower right behind it. Even worse fates are planned or likely for a number of remaining houses dating from the late 1880s. Still clinging to life is the Andrew Lees' residence at 909 Richards, built c. 1889-90. Less fortunate is the recently demolished "Birdhouse" House formerly at 1021 Richards Street. Built in 1907 for Robert F. Emory, the house had been owned from 1970 on by Percy Linden who, over the years, had created a quirky assemblage of hand-made birdhouses and poetic homilies. All but one of a row of early workers' houses recently disappeared from Seymour Street, across from the Penthouse, including the home of legendary Iaci's Italian Restaurant. The sole survivor is the 1906 William Gormley house, protruding from the precipice like a lone tooth awaiting the dentist's vise.

## **2. Woodward's Department Store** *101 W. Hastings Street*

There is still work to be done to ensure that the redevelopment of the Woodward's Building honours the building's heritage within its community. Woodward's has anchored the Victory Square district since Charles Woodward chose the northwest corner of Hastings and Abbott to build his second department store in 1903. Despite 12 additions occupying almost an entire city block, the building maintains a strong sense of architectural cohesion. Its muscular massing, red brick façade, and continuous street-wall define the area's historic character. The red neon 'W', atop an 80-foot steel tower, is a city icon. Hidden, but no less significant, is the massive, first growth, 'heavy-timber' structure supporting the original building. The department store closed in 1993, the building received City heritage designation in 1996, and in 2003 the City finally purchased it, re-lighting the neon 'W' as gesture of its commitment to revitalization of the landmark site and the wider neighbourhood. Unfortunately the city did not build that commitment into its call for redevelopment proposals — there was no specific requirement for retention of this designated building.

In the end, Council shortlisted three development proposals. In its communications to Council, HV favoured the Concert/Holborn proposal, because it emphasized significant heritage conservation, an appropriate scale of new development, and respectful interventions. We were dismayed when, in September 2004, Council selected Westbank; while recognizing that the Concert/Holborn proposal "represented the

most preferred heritage and urban design and architecture scheme," the City concluded that Concert/Holborn "posed the biggest concerns in the area of financial performance." From a heritage and urban context perspective, the current Westbank scheme is a disaster: token heritage retention, pastiche façadism, and insensitive interventions — not to mention the sprouting of a 30+ storey tower in the middle that ignores the site's context in a low-rise historic area. From what we can determine, Westbank would demolish virtually **all** of the existing Woodward's building outside of the small 1903/08 structure at the corner of Hastings and Abbott — it is doubtful that even façades would remain. We would thus lose more than an historic landmark; there's a serious risk of losing the district's historic streetscape and ambience if the building's exterior, or major parts of it, are destroyed.

There is one last glimmer of hope: in selecting Westbank, Council instructed the developer to "improve heritage conservation" in its detailed design development. This directive must be taken seriously, and we urge Westbank and the City to find ways to incorporate the existing landmark, to delete or reduce disrespectful interventions, and to scale down the height of the proposed tower.

## **3. Evergreen Building** *1285 W. Pender*

This modern landmark is a new addition to the HV Top Ten list and requires prompt action by City Council to preserve. Arthur Erickson designed the Evergreen as an office building for owner John Laxton. Completed in 1980, the Evergreen's unique stepped terraces and hanging gardens were configured to create the experience of working on a mountainside. Unlike other office buildings, every floor has access to outdoor patio space — an ideal condition for residential conversion. Erickson took full advantage of the stepped configuration, creating complex geometries through the interplay of off-set zigzag and linear floor plates, each floor diminishing in floor area within a trapezoidal building footprint. But, according to Laxton, the Evergreen's smaller upper-floor areas are a disadvantage in the current office market, while the location has high residential demand due to spectacular views and amenities. The existing office building is only 10 storeys (about 130') in a zone that permits a tower height of up to 300'. Considering conversion to residential, Laxton concluded that additional floor space was needed to improve financial return. To address compatibility with the

original design, Laxton retained Erickson, who designed a light, 4-storey, glass and steel box — intended to resemble a lantern — on the roof of the existing building. The additional floors would bring the total height to 175'.

Unfortunately, the building has no heritage protection as it did not meet the 20-year age requirement of the 1990 Recent Landmarks Inventory. Early in the development review process, the City offered Laxton a 'transfer of density' — the purchase of additional floor space for use elsewhere — in return for heritage designation. Laxton declined, claiming time constraints; in September 2004, City staff supported the proposed addition, stating 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 agreed, advising the City's Development Permit (DP) Board of its preference. To the surprise of many, however, the DP Board (an independent panel) refused to approve the conversion application due to the size of the proposed addition. Displeased, Laxton responded that, unless the decision is reversed, he will replace the Evergreen; a 300' tower, he claims, would be cheaper to build and more marketable than conversion of the existing building. Rumour has it that designs for a new building are already in the works.

Let's face it: from a design perspective, the Evergreen Building would be better off without the 4-storey addition. Yet without heritage protection this contemporary landmark is worth saving, with or without the addition. City Council must intervene quickly and directly, else the building will be rubble.

## **4. Burrard Bridge**

2004 saw no resolution to the status of Burrard Bridge and it continues to be of primary concern to HV. Completed in 1932 to provide a high-level crossing to the western neighbourhoods, the bridge is a triumph of civic architecture and a key gateway structure. Architects Sharp and Thompson, conscious of the bridge's ceremonial 'gateway' function, embellished the utilitarian steel superstructure with imposing concrete towers, torch-like entrance-pylons, and art deco sculptural details. Unifying the parts are heavy concrete railings, originally topped by decorative street lamps.

Fast forward to 2002: in order to facilitate and encourage cyclist and pedestrian use, the previous City Council considered — at a projected cost of \$10 million — demolition of the concrete railings and the addition

of ‘outrigger’ sidewalks. HV was dismayed at the possibility: without the original railings, the bridge would lose its strong edges, its architectural features would be isolated, and the proposed outrigger structures would radically alter its external appearance. After a 2-year hiatus in discussion, punctuated by a municipal election, Burrard Bridge reappeared on the radar screen in spring 2004. First, the present Council approved the City’s participation in the Canada-BC Infrastructure Program Seismic Upgrading Project, thereby adding \$2.5 million to the \$2 million already committed to seismic work. Also, in a potentially positive move, Council directed staff to return in fall 2004 with up to four options for improving the bridge for pedestrians and cyclists. Somewhat encouraging were Council’s instructions to give a higher priority to heritage.

The new options have yet to be made public. For HV, the issues remain the same: how to accommodate increased numbers of cyclists and pedestrians without compromising the heritage architecture and iconic status of the bridge. One potential solution — which HV has supported — might be closing two lanes of traffic, as this would halve costs and affect heritage less. Other solutions, we believe, also merit consideration — e.g., a new dedicated crossing for pedestrians and cyclists, or dedicated structures retrofitted underneath Granville and/or Burrard bridges.



Wing Sang Building

## 5. Chinatown & Gastown

The future of Chinatown & Gastown is again uncertain — but it’s not due to lack of heritage incentives. In fact, we congratulated the City on the adoption of generous incentives that included long-awaited tax breaks. Finally, we thought, property owners can finance rehabilitation and re-use. Well, property owners and developers are indeed rushing to the trough — not to rehabilitate, however, but to demolish all but street-facing façades. In return, of course, they ask for heritage benefits and the arguments for façadeism are disturbingly similar: old struc-

tures are unstable or deteriorated, require expensive seismic upgrades, have unworkable floor-plans, can’t accommodate parking, etcetera. This raises disturbing questions: is conservation of a historic district only about façades? What is the purpose of heritage incentives? Does the need for economic revitalization trump conservation?

In Chinatown, this situation is critical, because its buildings have rich historical significance — e.g., the many family and benevolent association structures and buildings such as the former Chinese Times and the Chinese Freemasons. To date, proposals for the latter two, either approved or pending, retain little beyond the buildings’ shell. This is now our big concern for the Wing Sang building, featured in the 2004 Top Ten list. Reputedly the oldest structure in Chinatown, the original building (at 51 Pender St.) is a tiny two-storey ‘Victorian Italianate’ dating from 1889. The second floor is unique for its ‘doorway-to nowhere’ through which furniture was winched to bypass narrow stairways. The 1889 building was incorporated into a larger structure built in 1901 by owner Yip Sang and designed by architect Thomas Ennor Julian (best known for Holy Rosary Cathedral). The three-storey addition, featuring a second-floor row of bay windows, housed Chinatown’s first Chinese doctor and two of its best-known restaurants — the BC Royal and the Yen Lock. Behind the building was Market Alley, once a thriving retail area of small shops and services. In 1912, Yip Sang built a 6-storey brick building across the Alley to provide a separate floor for each of his families — 3 wives and 23 children. Last fall, HV was encouraged to hear of the building’s purchase by Bob Rennie, who was reported to be planning a full heritage restoration, with offices and an art gallery in the front building and conversion of the alley building to loft condos. Now, however, rumour has it that little but the exterior will remain. If this is the case, an important piece of Chinatown’s history will be lost, and a disturbing precedent set. Chinatown deserves more than façadeism!

In Gastown, an iconic streetscape, five pivotal buildings may be compromised. Three related development proposals affect the historic Alhambra Hotel (1886) on Maple Tree Square, and all intervening buildings as far as the former Terminus Hotel — including the ‘Garage’, the Cordage Building and the Grand Hotel. Only the Terminus Hotel’s façade remains after a tragic fire. The developer is now requesting that the Grand join its neighbour in the façade club, due to structural rot,

unworkable layouts, and proposed parking excavation. Equally disturbing is the proposed height and bulk of additions: under the previous zoning (kept on the books to appease Gastown property owners), developers can forego heritage incentives and build to a full height of 75’ with no setbacks. This allows applicants the leverage to demand bonus height and floor space well in excess of the norm. The initial proposal would pile 3 floors above the Grand’s current 3 storeys and 2 additional floors on top of the Terminus; the result would overwhelm the existing façades. As well, the bulky additions would be major intrusions in the streetscape, especially as viewed along Water Street from the west. A related proposal includes 3 additional floors on the ‘Garage’ and, (gasp!) a 2-storey glass addition on top of the Alhambra.

## 6. Roselawn Funeral Home

*1661 E. Broadway near Commercial*

The City’s 1986 Heritage Register is out-of-date and full of holes; that means Roselawn Funeral Home may soon end up in one — in a landfill site. As this exquisite 1941 Mission-style building is not listed on the Register, it has no protection against demolition. It occupies 4 lots recently purchased by the Vancouver Coastal Health Authority. Although there is currently no development application, we understand Coastal Health intends to move the North Health Unit into a new building on this site.

Roselawn deserves better! By comparison, the former Imperial Oil Service Station (Malone’s) on Cornwall, also Mission style, is listed as a ‘B’ on the Register. Roselawn, an East Broadway landmark, is at least as architecturally significant as Imperial Oil. It should be listed on the Register and be eligible for heritage incentives. As the Home occupies only a portion of the site, the City could offer heritage incentives to facilitate retention of all or part of the existing building.

## 7. Jack Lindsay Photo Studio/

**Percy Underwood Office**

*1280a W. Pender*

Another gap in the Register, another building under threat. Best-known for his design of the Park Board offices at the Beach Avenue entrance to Stanley Park, Percy Underwood was one of Vancouver’s earliest practitioners of the International Style. In 1946, Underwood designed a photo studio for Jack Lindsay near Pender and Jervis. Underwood shared space in the studio, which predated by ten years the modernist building boom that

transformed Vancouver. The office is built on the lot fronting both Pender and Melville, near the apex where these two streets converge. Underwood achieved maximum light penetration by glazing almost the entire Pender and Melville elevations, creating a fish-bowl effect that must have seemed radical in 1946. From the street, the design is simple and geometric: a square, framed picture window divided by wood mullions forming a grid of smaller squares. The building received a 'B' ranking in the City's 1990 Recent Landmarks Inventory but lacks protection because it has not formally been added to the Heritage Register.

Cathedral Development Group/Busby & Assoc. have applied to construct a 28-storey tower project occupying the western half of the block. Although the building is potentially eligible for heritage incentives, there is no mention of heritage retention in the development notice. To add insult to injury, the application proposes an additional 10% floor space through the transfer (purchase) of heritage density from another site. This is inherently wrong: the City should not provide heritage incentives from a donor site to facilitate heritage demolition on a receiver site. Instead, the developer should earn additional floor space by finding a way to incorporate the Underwood office.

The same development puts other landmarks at risk: the Moderne apex building (occupied by 'Crimelab' Restaurant/Lounge) forms one of the most dramatic intersections in Vancouver. Although its profile is similar to the 'flatiron' shape of the Europe Hotel in Gastown, this building, with its prow-like front and horizontal mullioned glazing, strikingly evokes ocean liners of the 1920s. Also at risk are the 1951 Semmens and Simpson architectural offices at 1274 Pender, within which many well-known landmarks, including the former Central Library, and the original Bayshore Hotel, were designed.

## 8. Firehall No. 15

### *3003 East 22 at Nootka*

Concern for Firehall No. 15 persists: Firehall No. 15 is the last remaining of its kind still in use — Firehall No. 13 was demolished in 2002. The hose towers and distinctive bracketed eaves of these Craftsman-influenced structures were once familiar landmarks in neighbourhoods across the city. Built in 1925, Firehall No. 15 features extensive interior woodwork, ornate pressed-metal ceilings, and the

original brass pole.

An RFP has been issued for designs for a replacement firehall on the same site. But to demolish the existing building would be wasteful and unnecessary — it could easily be re-located across the street in Renfrew Park, perhaps adjacent to the library or at the old wading pool. The old Marpole Firehall saw new life as the Marpole Place Seniors' Centre; surely Firehall No. 15 could make a similar contribution to its community.

## 9. PNE Livestock Building

### *Miller Road, Hastings Park*

2004 was a year of much debate about the future of Hastings Park and the PNE; yet many issues remain to be resolved. One of them — the future of the Livestock Building — returns the site to the HV 2005 list. The Livestock Building has national significance as the marshalling facility for the internment of Japanese-Canadians in 1942. The building is also architecturally significant: built in two phases, the oldest section dates from the 1920s and the younger section from 1941. The later building was designed by Marine Building architects McCarter and Nairne in the same year as the Deco/Moderne Garden Auditorium and is one of the city's best surviving examples of Moderne design. Ironically, its sleek 'streamline' detailing and striking columned portico are under-appreciated because fairgoers only see the rear of the building. The front façade faces the racetrack and Miller Road — at one time the Fair's main axis — and is obscured by a canopied walkway.

Over the past 8 years, public discussion has roamed hither and yon: in 1997, when it seemed clear that the PNE was to be re-located elsewhere in the province, the Hastings Park Restoration Plan called for removal of many PNE buildings, including the Livestock Building. In 2003/4, when the decision to relocate the fair was reversed, the City undertook a major public process of identifying and evaluating four development options. In June 2004, City Council declared continuation of an annual fair in some form, including retention of the Roller Coaster — an earlier entry on our Top Ten list. The fate of the Livestock Building was left up in the air, although Council directed its staff to report back in fall 2004 on a process to address (among other things) heritage assessment of the building. We hope no news is good news, as previous options were at best façade retention. With a continuing fair, we see strong reasons to retain the entire building intact for uses compatible

with the new vision for Hastings Park.

## 10. Charles Dickens Elementary School

### *3351 Glen Drive*

Already front and centre in 2005 are the implications of seismic upgrading for Vancouver's heritage schools. Charles Dickens Elementary School, on the 2004 Top Ten list, is under serious threat and a final decision to replace it is imminent. The reason: seismic and other upgrades apparently cost more than a new school and the 'bottom line' trumps heritage. Constructed in 1912, and similar in design to Henry Hudson (built the year before and a 'B' on the Heritage Register), Dickens Elementary's brick walls, pitched roof and decorative Renaissance-style pilasters are emblematic of the history of our city and its neighbourhoods. Unfortunately Dickens — and 69 other Vancouver schools — have been designated at high risk in earthquakes and must be upgraded or replaced.

Last November — gearing up for the 2005 provincial election — Premier Campbell promised \$1.5 billion, over the next 15 years, to seismic upgrades of the province's schools. The Vancouver School Board (VSB) quickly requested about \$365 million to fast-track the upgrades for completion in ten years (after all, Seattle did it). But recent public meetings make it abundantly clear that the VSB has no interest whatsoever in entertaining other options for Dickens School. As the bottom line drives VSB decisions, Dickens is just the beginning — so get ready for the wrecking ball in your neighbourhood. The larger issue is this: How many of our historic schools must be demolished in order to ensure seismic safety? That the fate of Dickens could set a precedent for the loss of landmark schools across the city raises bluntly the question of our commitment to heritage: do we value our public heritage buildings, and how much are we willing to invest to save them for future generations? With an election approaching, perhaps it's time to ask School Board Trustees where they stand.

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