

# HISTORY OF HERITAGE CONSERVATION IN VICTORIA



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## **SITUATION BRIEF # 53**

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### **Early History**

*Victoria has long expressed a popular attachment to buildings and monuments that mark out its history.*

The present Parliament Buildings were strategically positioned the James Bay foreshore by architect Francis Mawson Rattenbury so as to retain the pre-existing range of 5 structures comprising the Colonial Administration Buildings built in 1859. On completion the old buildings were torn down but one of old bungalow style structures, the former Legislative Assembly, was preserved behind the new “Leg.” At the architect’s suggestion this remaining “Birdcage” was jacked up and moved back a few metres. It became the Provincial Museum of Minerals. The exercise was repeated in 1911 to accomplish the Legislative Library addition to the Parliament Buildings. In 1943 the Museum got an historic plaque which alas did not insure its survival. Fire destroyed it in 1957. Noted in the British Colonist newspaper at the time as “The most priceless historic building in BC...” the government briefly considered reconstructing it. Alas this issue promptly faded from public attention with the loss of perhaps the Province’s second most priceless building two weeks later, Government House.



Active in the campaign to rebuild the historic “Birdcage” Legislature building were two local groups of heritage enthusiasts, the Native Sons (founded in 1899) and Native Daughters of British Columbia (founded in 1919). Along with the British Columbia Historical Society they had campaigned in 1925 to save the 1855 Craigflower School House at the head of Gorge Waterway, leasing it a couple of years later. From 1931 they operated as a museum dedicated to the early history of Victoria. In 1968 the school and nearby Craigflower Farm manor house were acquired by the Governments British Columbia and Canada for designation as both a Provincial Heritage Site and National Historic Site. The Government of Canada had already recognized the national heritage significance of Fort Victoria, marking it with a plaque unveiled on Government Street in 1952.

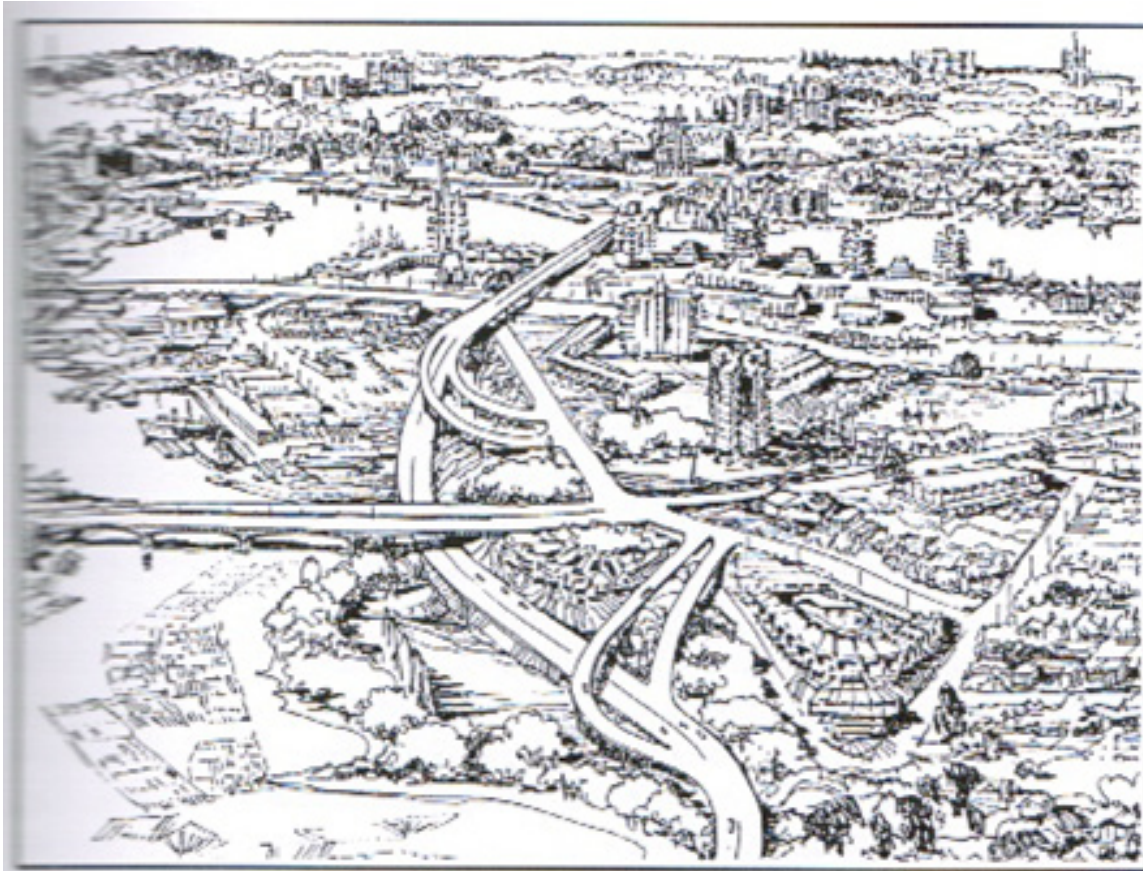
### **Post War Urban Revitalization**

A comprehensive local heritage conservation program was to await the post-war boom years of the 1960s. In January 1963, Mayor R. B. Wilson, acting on a Council resolution, requested that the Capital Region Planning Board undertake an Overall Plan for Victoria. Victoria was facing drastic changes. That year BC Ferries opened their Swartz Bay-Tsawwassen service; the Provincial

Museum was under construction; and spot zoning for high-rise office and apartment development, challenging the 1956 comprehensive zoning bylaw, was becoming commonplace. Council noted it was facing major decisions relating to land use. Plans were needed for for what became Centennial Victoria Square, the Cathedral Hill Precinct, Harbour-Causeway Improvements, Urban Renewal, DowntownImprovement, parks development, and traffic rationalization.

The resulting document, tabled in early 1965, set the terms for 30 years of debate regarding the future of the city. On the one hand, it noted "a measure of a city's maturity is the extent to which it will on the one hand encourage in the proper setting well-planned modern office buildings or high-rise apartments and on the other hand, preserve a building constructed in the last century." The reference was in particular to the city's plan for Centennial Square. The document's recommendations were both specific and sweeping. "Retention of the ingredients of genuine character" was encouraged but dramatic increases in density were recommended to spur economic renewal. Chinatown should be rehabilitated. Bastion Square should be rejuvenated.

The report recommended the revitalization of the Inner Harbour and downtown by means of recreational use, reducing through traffic, improving pedestrian use and providing parking were all laudable objectives. However, also on the order paper were a major 250,000- square -foot shopping mall in the vicinity of Johnson and Pandora, a sweeping reordering of traffic circulation via a major urban "high-speed truck route" (West Victoria Freeway) that would slice through the heart of Victoria West, leap the Inner Harbour Narrows at Laurel Point, then feed Ogden Point Terminal or snake around the Parliament Buildings



Proposed "Victoria West, 1990," from the *Overall Plan for The City of Victoria, 1965.*

on Superior and return out on Douglas Street. This would also provide for the densification of James Bay with high-rise residential towers. The story of heritage conservation in Victoria is one of gradually, neighbourhood by neighbourhood, taming these parts of the plan. Neighbourhood groups coalesced, James Bay being the earliest. Preservation societies such as the Victoria Hallmark (founded 1973) formed to defend heritage by taking on intensive casework and building-by-building protest. In 1971 a group of UBC architecture students spent a summer assembling a heritage planning report on the City's historic core. They published a seminal document, the Old Town Report, which argued for a comprehensive conservation program. In response, the following year Mayor Peter Pollen appointed a Heritage Advisory Committee under the chair

of Alderman Samuel Bawlf. Their recommendations for an amendment to the Municipal Act for heritage protection via designation became provincial law in 1973. Early in 1975, the first designation in the oldest part of Old Town was enacted, the Gold Rush era Warehouses lining Wharf Street. Simultaneously the Department of Public Works was undertaking an in-depth study of the Parliamentary Precinct. Among its various recommendations were to revitalize St. Ann's Academy, refocus public marine transit in the CP Steamship Building, shift the development of new office buildings into the downtown, repair the heritage character in the Parliament Buildings vicinity and infill with contextual housing. In 1977 the Crystal Gardens Preservation Society was formed under the chair of Peter Cotton to lobby for the public re-use of this major Victoria monument. By the 1970s Victoria's conservation programmes were attracting national attention. In 1976, for instance, Fort Victoria Properties was singled out for a Heritage Canada Foundation Award of Honour for its revitalization of Market Square.

In the meantime the Provincial Government undertook the restoration of the late 19th century British Columbia Parliament Buildings, one of the three major monuments defining the historic landscape of Victoria's harbour entrance and traditional gateway to the City (The other two are the Empress Hotel and Canadian Pacific Steamship Terminal.)

In September 1977, Section 71.4A of the Municipal Act was replaced by the Heritage Conservation Act. The new Act enabled City Council to designate by bylaw, lands, structures or buildings, in whole or in part, as municipal heritage sites. Public notices and hearings were required before a heritage bylaw could be adopted. It also empowered Council to withhold a demolition or building permit for a period of up to 90 days where a non-designated property may have possible heritage significance. Finally, the Act required municipalities to compensate an owner where economic loss was suffered through designation. Also, in 1977, the

Provincial Act was revised. A Heritage Conservation Branch was established to assist local government with heritage stewardship in an expert advisory role. The British Columbia Heritage Trust was founded to assist with financial incentives and collaborative projects.



## **The New Regime**

Since 1975 the Heritage Program of the City of Victoria has been founded on education and popularization of heritage conservation values. Foremost has been the inventory process and resulting publications. The Heritage Advisory Committee membership was constituted to reflect community values rather than merely professional or academic concerns. The Downtown Inventory was first published as a popular book, *This Old Town*, in March 1975. *This Old House*, covering the residential neighbourhoods, followed in 1979. In 1980 Council adopted a Historic Restoration Act for Chinatown.

The 1980s saw various research initiatives which were to bear fruit over the next 20 years. These included studies examining the economics of

commercial buildings upper floor utilization, completion of a new Downtown heritage register of some 238 buildings, night-scaping guidelines for Old Town, and the Civic Trust providing grants for conservation design services to building owners. Historic cemeteries, both Pioneer Square and Ross Bay cemetery, got long-over due attention. Funds were provided for monument restoration in Pioneer Square and a heritage management plan and design guidelines were published to improve the maintenance of Ross Bay. A major set backs came with designation-owner compensation and financial assistance by the City deemed illegal. The Province's heritage protection legislation came under fire. A "work-around" was finally achieved in 1983 by the creation of the community-based non-profit Victoria Heritage Foundation to act as an intermediary arms-length funding body.

In 1990 the Foundation Group completed a comprehensive building-by-building inventory of Old Town. By 1980 some 136 buildings had been voluntarily designated in the City of Victoria. A second aspect has been the provision of incentives. In 1990 the Victoria Civic Heritage Trust on the model was established to assist owners of commercial buildings through grants, interpretive and education programs. Designated buildings are recognizable by a distinctive bronze plaque. The Civic Trust, with partner funding from the Provincial BC Heritage Trust embarked on a series of studies which included plans for the restoration of streetscapes and character areas of Old Town. Looking ahead to the need for a comprehensive Downtown heritage interpretation program a major study was commissioned, *Bringing the City to Life: An Interpretation Plan for Downtown Victoria*. While a few recommendations have been acted on, at this time it awaits a more comprehensive roll-out. 1992/3 saw Victoria's largest heritage conservation project to that date started. Finally completed in 1997 the restoration of St. Ann's Academy and grounds by the Provincial Capital



Commission. The multi-million revitalization initiative included a complete restoration of 1858 chapel (the original Roman Catholic Cathedral), a Victorian entrance bell-tower entrance block (both as a museum), an auditorium for public use, and revitalization of the adjoining wings as for office use.



However, the 1990s also saw what is probably most controversial heritage “appropriation” project. This was the Cadillac-Fairview redevelopment plan to demolish two entire blocks of Old Town to insert a contemporary shopping. Even though such a scheme had been envisaged in the 1965 Overall Plan for Victoria as a means of economically anchoring a revitalized Downtown the scale and brutalist first design came as a shock. Right through to final approval the proposal faced bitter opposition. In the end after serial adjustments to the design an overall faux neo-Edwardian envelope was wrapped around a four story atrium centred block with exterior retail at street-level. The deconstructed

facades of four heritage buildings were incorporated into the exterior envelope. Even though such schemes were common in post-war Europe's heavy damaged cities, in this case what riled local heritage advocates was that the demolition a result of contemporary economic circumstances

In 1995, after extensive consultation with municipalities and the heritage community, the Government of British Columbia finally enacted a revised Heritage Act. As well as formally enabling a number of the initiatives already underway in Victoria, the Act expanded both the range of preservation tools and the applicability of heritage designation to areas (i.e., landscapes, neighbourhoods) to building interiors and even objects (i.e., marine vessels, industrial machinery). The same year the City Adopted its new Official Community Plan with heritage conservation one of its core values along with policies to support building preservation.

A City-wide strategic heritage conservation plan was commissioned in 2002 and year later a Beacon Hill Park Masterplan was adopted by the City in 2003. It assured the heritage values and features of Western Canada's oldest surviving Victorian landscape park is assured. But a major loss, after extensive public debate, to the City's industrial heritage was the double-truss bascule 1925 Johnson Street bridge which connected Old Town to Vic West. Its replacement nodded at the engineering principles of the former bridge but adopted a modernized version of bascule technology. In 2012 the Provincial Capital Commission restored the lavish late Edwardian interior of a major harbour monument, the Canadian Pacific Steam Ship terminal after 10 years of public use a restaurant now awaits a new use, and life.

Evaluation of the heritage merit of buildings in Victoria is one based on community discussion and debate. Every designation requires a public hearing and vote of Council. The Heritage Advisory Committee's primary task

is to maintain a Heritage Registry consisting of those buildings designated, and those deemed worthy of designation. A first consideration is the concept of "Conservation Areas": a group of buildings having special architectural or historic interest giving an area a distinctive character. Streetscapes, view-scapes and identifiable groups of buildings provide for the application of a range of protective measures to ensure the long-term health of buildings. Beyond this, buildings demonstrating various styles and forms, representing different ethnic or income groups, are considered. Final selection criteria then consider the specifics of historical significance, architectural and environmental integrity; restoration or rehabilitation potential. The election of a building to the Heritage Registry means that it is flagged in the planning and building department files for special attention in the event of proposed rezoning, alterations or demolition.

The Heritage Advisory Committee has articulated criteria for evaluating and selecting heritage buildings. Buildings and sites of historical value are defined as those which are representative of a significant era in the evolution of the community; a milestone signifying an important turn of events locally or nationally; or reflective of particular cultural or social values of the community. Structures of architectural value are those which exhibit richness in details reflective of the times or which are pieces of artwork in themselves, representative work of generally recognized masters, an overall aesthetic pleasure to the public eye, important influence on the character of the surrounding environment, unique style or technique. Buildings of practical value for restoration are those buildings which are structurally sound, have the potential for functional adaptability for future use, contain adequate essential services and safety provisions, retain a high degree of design integrity, are compatible with the surrounding land use.

Work on creating statement-of-significance for Inventory buildings has been a major research priority of the City. Over 40 individual conservation plans for Downtown heritage sites and building have been commissioned. A building-by-building seismic upgrading program is underway. Now the Victoria Heritage Foundation and the Victoria Civic Heritage Trust support restoration work to the amount of nearly one million dollars a year. The region boasts over 1000 listed and designated heritage buildings.

The Victoria Civic Heritage Trust, under its Building Incentive Program (BIP), provides financial assistance to owners of commercial or institutional heritage designated buildings to assist with seismic upgrading. Grants may cover up to 50% of the cost of eligible heritage work, up to a maximum of \$50,000 per project. The Province instituted a Seismic Mitigation Program in 2017 with an allocation of \$1.9 billion to address high-risk public buildings throughout the Province. Under this program most of the regions historic red-brick schools have been retrofitted. The last and largest project, the historic 1913 Edwardian Victoria High School is now underway.



Groups of heritage buildings have been conserved through two by-law instruments, Development Permit Areas and Heritage Conservation Areas. The former has been used to address the special setting and fabric of character area, including those with high heritage value such as the core of Old Town. The City's Official Community Plan of 2012 introduced a new initiative to identify clusters of buildings by theme and place and establish Heritage Conservation Areas. The first HCA to be created was the Battery Street neighbourhood in James Bay. Citizens are encouraged to nominate potential sites. Fourteen have been created containing 195 heritage properties and more are in the planning stage at this time. Once area designations are approved any changes are controlled by a set of guidelines for subdivisions, new construction, building additions and alterations. Interpretive signage may be installed.

The ultimate success of heritage conservation has, however, been the result of embedding conservation values, practices and management mechanisms in the official Community Plan. Controlling densities and height restrictions favour the retention of extant building stock, bonusing to reward designation or conservation investment, articulating design guidelines and controls to retain and enhance the heritage character of an area, permitting special uses in exchange for rehabilitation, rerouting traffic, public beautification projects and encouraging pedestrian use to assist the economic health of retail uses, undertaking interpretation and animation programs from guided tours to street vending - all result from policy objectives articulated in the downtown and individual neighbourhood plans. The city has published general Advisory Design Guidelines for new development throughout the city and more specific guidelines for the City's Chinatown area. Special guidelines have also been published to assist owners of heritage buildings in carrying out renovations or adding signs to commercial buildings.

## First Nations Heritage

The preservation of First Nations heritage in the region has taken a different track. The rich cultural heritage of the local Lekwungen speaking people is primarily intangible. It lives in language, customs, beliefs, rituals, oral histories and stories, lineages, and lived traditions. Values are imbedded in relationships with the land, nature and the environment. But it is language that stitches all this together as carrier of memory through generations. Two hundred years of colonialism dispossessed communities of their land, suppressed their cultural practices, and confiscated their art. But it was the banning of language that comprises the core of resulting cultural genocide. This was done to a large degree by the Indian residential school system.

It is not surprising therefore that parallel to the development of local Settler interest in the heritage values imbedded in the natural and built environment First Nations' first actions were to reclaim and revive their languages.

The Royal BC Museum created its Linguistics Division in 1970 to document the 34 Indigenous languages of British Columbia. But previous to that, in the



1960s David Elliott, a Saanich Tsartlip band member, started a comprehensive project to document, record and teach the local SENOCTEN language of the Saanich nations. By 1978 he had developed a unique orthography and started a dictionary which were formally adopted for teaching by the Saanich Indian School Board in 1984. Work has continued since under the leadership of David Elliott's son J, SINTSEN John, with the development of language revival tools such as SENCOTEN Survival School for adults and a K-9 language program in the local LE, WELNEW Tribal School.

In 1990 the Provincial Government in partnership with First Nations created the First Peoples Cultural Council, a granting agency headquartered in Brentwood, dedicated "to assist BC First Nations in their efforts to revitalize their languages, arts and culture." The Cultural Council has created First Voices, a suite of web-based tools to support Indigenous people in language archiving and teaching, and cultural revitalization. Indeed, much early work of the Council focused on developing digital technologies to language research and training. In 2008 the First People's Language map of BC was launched. Extensive local oral history work has resulted in an on-line regional map of SENCOTEN place names, geographical features and Indigenous sacred sites. In 2014 the Council partnered with the Royal BC Museum to create the award winning "Our Living Languages" exhibition followed by a travelling version in 2019. In 2018 the Province provided a \$50 million grant to the Council to support First Nations language revitalization throughout British Columbia.

Language revival has provided the foundation for cooperation with the wider community to identify, mark and preserve important elements of the Indigenous cultural landscape. On the Victoria Harbour and Gorge Waterway the Victoria Harbour Authority, Victoria, Saanich, and Esquimalt municipalities have worked with local First Nations to create trail signage which interprets

the 10,000 years of traditional use of the land and water. This now become standard practice in heritage interpretive signage installations throughout the neighbourhoods and parks of the region. Victoria commissioned the Spindle Whorl series, “Signs of Lekwungen” public art sculptural pieces in 2008 which delineate the original boundaries of the Songhees territory on Victoria’s harbour. Oak Bay municipality has built commemorative cairns to mark the historic Indigenous village sites along its coastline. Most local Municipalities are now working with local First Nations governments and cultural agencies to reinstate the traditional names of important landmarks and spiritual places. Mount Douglas was recently renamed PKOLS, in the SENCOTEN language.

## **Observations**

- The Victoria region, and Victoria in particular, boasts one of the most robust heritage conservation programs in Canada. The challenge is to keep it current. Current threats to the heritage fabric that need constant vigilance are seismic (building code updates) and flooding (climate change induced threats including changing weather patterns and rising sea-levels)
- A particular challenge in Victoria will be to manage Federal and Provincial Government pressures to densify. For instance, policies to address “the missing middle” by densifying historic neighbourhoods have yet to be assessed for conservation implications in historic areas. Creeping rezoning to accommodate highrise developments continues as a major risk.
- While protective legislation provides ample tools for managing the historic built fabric of the City, it is not always clear there is the political to use them. Watch-dog groups such as the Hallmark Society need to be particularly vigilant in this respect.
- Interventions in the fabric of historic buildings may need to become more



dramatic to accommodate tightening seismic and public safety codes. The professional design community, heritage conservation professionals and heritage advocates in general need to engage in a serious debate regarding the principles and ethics of conservation: for instance approaches to conservation, repair, replication and reconstruction.

- The post-WWII building boom throughout British Columbia endowed Victoria with a rich Mid-Century Modern heritage. This has been largely ignored with only a few representative examples designated in Victoria and Saanich (including Saanich's own Brutalist Municipal Hall) designated. The four core Municipalities should collaborate on undertaking a comprehensive inventory of built legacy of the period 19040-1980. The rapidly developing archival holdings of the University of Victoria Libraries (Special Collections: Architectural Archive of the Pacific Northwest) are an important resource.

## **Resources**

"British Columbia, Designated Heritage Sites Registry." 1993.

"City of Victoria Downtown Heritage Management Plan." 1989. "City of Victoria: Official Community Plan." 1986.

"Inner City Neighbourhoods." 1976. Mazer, L. D. and M. Segger "City of Victoria Central

Area Heritage Conservation Report." 1975.

"Overall Plan for The City of Victoria." 1965.

"Wharf Street: City of Victoria: Heritage Designation Report." 1974.