



Remaking Vancouver: 1940-1970



Historic Context Statement

Post-1940 Register Update and Statements of Significance 2006



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Introduction

An historic context statement is a document used in planning for a community's historic resources. It identifies the broad patterns of historic development of the community and identifies historic property types, such as buildings, sites, structures, objects or districts, which may represent these patterns of development. In addition, a historic context statement provides direction for evaluating and protecting significant historic resources. As a planning document, it is intended to be a dynamic document, evolving as community needs and desires change.

Remaking Vancouver 1940-1970 is the historic context statement prepared by the Post-1940 Register Update consultant team, in collaboration with a list of resource people from the City of Vancouver Planning staff and the public, as a foundation for the production of Statements of Significance for twenty-three heritage resources built in the three decades between 1940 and 1970. The writing was an exercise in capturing succinctly the social, cultural, economic and physical developments in Vancouver during those years.



Remaking Vancouver: 1940-1970

1.0 The Young Metropolis in 1940

Vancouver was, in 1940, a comparatively recent creation – younger even than some of its citizens. Vancouver originated in the mid-1880s as the terminus of the Canadian Pacific Railway. As Robert A.J. McDonald recalls in *Making Vancouver, 1863-1913*, by the time of the First World War Vancouver had become the province's major urban centre with a population topping 100,000. In spite of its youth, Vancouver held demographic supremacy over the province. In 1929 Vancouver absorbed its two adjoining municipalities of middle-class West Point Grey to the southwest and working-class South Vancouver to the southeast; in so doing the city consolidated an existing east-side/west-side class divide running north and south roughly along Main Street. By the time of the 1931 census Vancouver housed over a third of British Columbia's population in a Lower Mainland and Fraser Valley region that contained over half the population.

In the early years, Vancouver's commercial, institutional, and significant residential construction borrowed from the British and American design tradition, as one would expect of a city peopled largely by those of British origin, yet living alongside an economic powerhouse. As well as British traditions, local commercial, and residential building



House at 1735 E. 49th Ave, July 1, 1947.
Courtesy of the Vancouver Archives
BuP737.3

reflected the economic and cultural influence Chicago, San Francisco, and Seattle. Vancouver's suburbs were full of wood-based Craftsman bungalows, an American offshoot of the British Arts and Crafts movement well suited to modest housing and making use of the relatively inexpensive lumber that the hinterlands were offering up in great quality and quantity.

Built and marketed early on as a city of garden suburbs, Vancouver was marked by its grid of suburban streets extending out from a compact central business district on the downtown peninsula. The vast majority of residential accommodation in the city was in the form of single-family dwellings on modest sized lots. Except for the downtown, commercial properties were in the form of one- or two-storey buildings lining perhaps a dozen main streets running the length and breadth of the suburban lands.

The distinguishing planning features of the suburban grid came from the American and British City Beautiful movement. The desire for a grander urban scale led to the commissioning in 1929 of the American planning firm of Harland Bartholomew. The 1930 Plan, while not adopted, was revisited in 1946-48 and used in the city's first attempt at a comprehensive organization of its infrastructure, boulevards, and parks. The Plan's legacy includes a nudging of the early pattern of development of the city along the established transportation corridors to New Westminster (the Interurban line and Kingsway) and to Steveston (the Interurban line passing through Kerrisdale and Marpole).

The English-ness (and Scottish-ness) of the suburban portions of the city in 1940 was almost everywhere apparent. A strong influence from the English garden tradition was evident in the generously treed streetscapes and early parks. Houses were almost uniformly set back behind well-tended lawns and planted borders. The Bartholomew Plan, with its American Olmsteadian influence, featured picturesque treed public lands: both boulevards and parks.

2.0 Vancouver's changing population, 1940-1970

Between 1940 and 1970, Vancouver was remade. In contrast to the 1920s and the stagnation of the 1930s, Vancouver was transformed beginning with the Second World War. The 1940s brought a new demand for resources and war materials that fuelled Vancouver's growth beyond the end of the war. In the postwar era, Vancouver experienced an economic boom driven by the resource economy of the province, port activities, industrial consolidation, and immigration. The city's population grew from 275,000 in 1941 to 345,000 by 1951 and then 425,000 by 1971. This growth within the city's borders masked Vancouver's acquisition of a faster growing suburban hinterland (in a pattern which has continued into the present day), consolidating its role as the financial powerhouse of, and cultural centre for, the region. The population of the Lower Mainland, excepting Vancouver, and the Fraser Valley skyrocketed from 150,000 in 1941 to 700,000 by 1971.



People walking on Georgia outside the Hudson's Bay Store 1940s. Courtesy of the Vancouver Archives CVA 1184-1005

The character of the city's population during these three decades is key to understanding the resulting physical changes. While Vancouver was British Columbia's largest city and the centre of the province's most populous region, it was not a primarily *British Columbian* city. Persons born in the province did not form a majority of its population. The proportion born in British Columbia would only grow from 33% in 1941 to 40% three decades later.

The composition of persons from outside the province altered. In 1941 three-quarters of Vancouverites were British by ethnic origin; by 1971 half so described themselves. The proportion

born in Britain or its possessions halved from a quarter to an eighth. The major new demographic component originated in continental Europe. The proportion of peoples of continental European background almost doubled, from one-in-six to almost one-in-three by 1961. Part of this influx was due to more persons displaced by the war coming from those countries, and part to migration west from the Prairies of offspring of continental Europeans who had earlier settled there, as they did in large numbers during the great Canadian immigration boom prior to the First World War.

Apart from Prairie migrants, persons who were born elsewhere in Canada made up a minor component of the Vancouver population and therefore very likely of its cultural and artistic life. Over the two decades following the Second World War the proportion of Vancouverites born in the Maritimes, Quebec, and Ontario fell to under one-in-ten, in the United States to one-in-forty. Immediately after the war's end, a significant number of people were demobilized in Vancouver, and it may be some of these eventually found their way back to stay for good.

While today Vancouver is a city with a considerable proportion, almost 40%, of the population having Asian origins, due in good part to Hong Kong's return to China in 1997, during the three decades 1940-70 the percentages were relatively small. The proportion began to grow modestly only toward the end of the time period to just over one-in-twenty born in Asia and about one-in-twelve of Asian origin. Other visible groups were, and continue to be, miniscule. The population of African-American peoples was small in 1940-70, and today is under 1% of Vancouver's population. The proportion of Aboriginal people has grown slightly from under 1% to 2%.

The relatively small proportions of persons embodying difference did not prevent Vancouverites of the dominant society, who lived primarily on the west side, from seeking to neutralize what they saw as a potential for contaminating the dominant British ethos. Continental Europeans, particularly if

belonging to the middle class, as did such newcomers as the prominent Koerner family, were acceptable, but not persons visibly distinct. Race/ethnicity, intersecting with class, gave a very important basis for distinguishing some residents of Vancouver from others. The locations of public amenities and also of private residences constructed during the three decades that the dominant society today considers heritage-worthy strongly reflect these attitudes.

Persons identifying themselves as British, and hence part of the broadly-defined dominant society, comprised three-quarters or more of residents everywhere in Vancouver except for the central business district and East End. In other words, it was in these particularly visible areas at the centre of the city that persons embodying difference by virtue of being Chinese or Japanese made up a significant portion of the population.

The consequence was that, despite the relatively low proportions of residents city-wide who were differentiated by skin tones, persons in charge of Vancouver were determined to ensure these minorities were set apart. Persons of Chinese, Japanese, East Indian, and Aboriginal descent were still prohibited in 1940 from voting and thereby from most professional employment. Chinese and East Indian British Columbians were given the vote provincially in 1947, Japanese Canadians and Aboriginal people two years later in 1949. Some municipally-controlled labouring jobs were restricted to persons perceived as 'white,' as with the Vancouver Parks Board in such wide ranging instances as manufacturing ice cream for sale in Stanley Park and working on the road cut through the park to the north shore of Burrard Inlet during the late 1930s. Such prohibitions may have largely ended with the Second World War, but attitudes undoubtedly lingered. Vancouver restaurants like the White Lunch were well known for limiting their clientele to reflect their name.



Crowd watching VJ celebrations in Chinatown, 1945. Courtesy of the Vancouver Archives CVA 1184-3046

Anecdotal information suggests that some theatres and other cultural institutions encouraged persons able to be distinguished as Asian or Aboriginal to sit in the balcony or in some other less desirable location.

In the period under study there persisted a definite income/class divide in the city roughly at Main Street (with anomalous west side working-class pockets associated with specific industries: quarry workers on the east flank of Queen Elizabeth Park, sawmill workers in Marpole, brewery workers in Kitsilano). Perhaps the most invidious basis of exclusion in the city, because it was the most invisible and because it continued over the three decades in question, was a deliberate spatial separation of residential areas. At least some persons buying property in what were considered to be more desirable areas of the city, from the perspective of the British-oriented dominant society, had to sign a covenant committing to both class and race segregation. They had to agree to spend a fairly large amount of money on house construction, which kept out persons of lesser means, and to ensure that the property would not be sold to any "Asiatic, Negro, or Indian". This practice was in place by 1941 and, it appears, only made illegal in 1985 in the British Columbia Charter of Rights Amendment Act, section 222 (1).

All of these demographic factors need to be brought into any assessment of the heritage value of properties constructed between 1940 and 1970. To the extent persons retain the culture and outlooks brought by them or their parents from elsewhere and incorporate these dispositions into the buildings they construct, it was British origins that gave the dominant motif to pre-World War II Vancouver, with the addition of continental European outlooks in the late 1940s, and the 1950s and '60s. As well as salient physical characteristics, the locations, the designers, and the original ownership of structures now considered to be particularly outstanding heritage resources reflect these demographic factors.



*Art in Living Group, 1945.
Courtesy of Rhodri Windsor-Liscombe*

3.0 Re-thinking design, 1940-1970

Beginning in the late 1930s/early '40s, as part of an international re-thinking, there was a Canada-wide redefinition of architecture - from an elitist and artistic vocation to a diverse series of agendas to establish contemporary design practices taking advantage of new technologies and techniques for interventions in the public sphere. Common to all the diversity was an enormous self-belief of the architects and planners in their capacity to make better both the physical and social environment. Wells Coates, a UBC graduate in engineering, said at a general meeting of the Architectural Association in London in 1938: "As architects of a new *Order*, we should be concerned with an architectural solution of social and economic problems, for the tradition of architecture is to seek the response that leads to the freedom and fullness of life." As the 1940s came to a close, this international re-thinking was augmented by an influx into British Columbia of artists and architects from continental Europe (often via the United States) who were escaping the ravages of war and looking for a place to begin life anew. They brought with them direct experience of this Modern Movement's design theory and practice. Vancouver's designers during the years 1940-1970 increasingly drew their inspiration from new international examples.

New stylistic practices were a loose mix of novel stylistic ideals and theories, which had in common a rejection of the imitation of historical forms and a sense of boldly re-imagining the problem of planning and building for modern ways of living. Locally, the post-war period saw an intermingling of artistic practices and an ongoing discourse among artists, architects, designers, and craftspeople. Institutions such as the Vancouver School of Art, the University of British Columbia, and the Vancouver Art Gallery had an influence that extended beyond the art world. The roles of the architect expanded to include ensuring that the client's enterprise functioned well within the context of the larger city, and that the buildings designed were contributing to a healthier cityscape and a new way of living.

This transformation did not occur overnight. The city's architectural practitioners in the 1940s and early '50s had been schooled elsewhere, often in the United States or Europe. The American architectural education emphasized a Modernist formalism that had rigid formulae for grids and the standard planning of spaces with the grid. The spatial requirements of human activity were made to fit into formal arrangements, informed by abstract spatial notions and visual effects.

Change was in the air. Following an already-established European tradition, Vancouver exhibitions sponsored by the Art in Living Group (especially its "The New Community" 1945) and the Community Arts Council ("Design for Living" show at the Vancouver Art Gallery 1949) reflected a concern with the reconstruction and modernization of both design and community, and a goal of economic stability and social security. The Art in Living Group (associated with the Vancouver School of Art) was founded by Fred Amess and B.C. Binning in 1944. Following earlier initiatives in Europe and America, the Group was motivated by the powerful promise of a "new world" that it believed could be achieved every bit as much through art and architecture as through social reform. By combining the talents of a variety of art practices, the Group questioned the status of urban planning in Vancouver. It favoured grand plans for urban redevelopment as well as changes on a

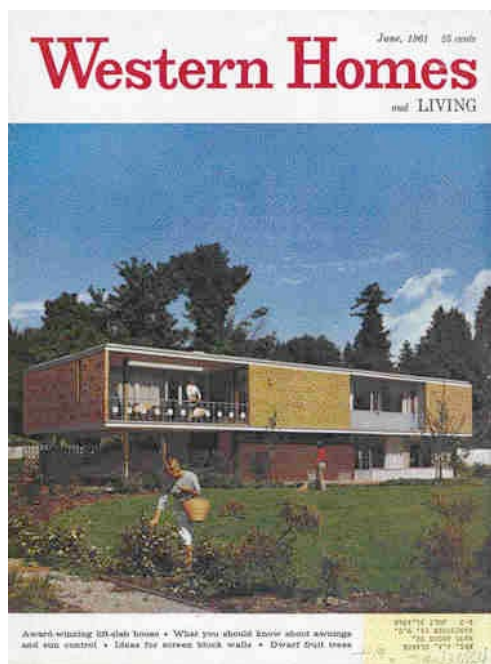
domestic scale, and promoted the notion that participation in the arts was a way to increase the quality of urban life.

Beginning in 1947, an Architectural Design degree program was offered locally, at the University of British Columbia. Fred Lasserre, its first Director, had placed two conditions on accepting the position of Director of the School: that he be allowed to create first a School of Fine Arts and second a School of City Planning. He hoped to encourage the creation of low-cost housing, while at the same time localize progressive transatlantic design idioms and practices.

Lasserre attracted a faculty that ensured its program reflected the eclectic and pragmatic nature of Canadian architectural training and of the new approaches to design, which were closely attuned to developments in the fields of Planning and the Fine Arts. The arrival of internationally-trained architects was a significant factor in the cultural transfer of new design ideas to Vancouver.

The desire for change went beyond architecture and design per se. Official reports for the city were released during the 1940s, '50s, and '60s which supported the popular awareness of the need for more social services (epitomized by the reports from the Federal Advisory Committee on Reconstruction) and lay the groundwork for civic interventions that sought to transform the city (1950 Marsh Report, 1958 Coal Harbour/Project 200, and public housing and freeway construction on the east side). New planning and design theory was felt by the artistic and professional elite to be the means to an improved social fabric and to the creation of a new world through art and architecture, as well as through social reform. Art, design, civic policy, transportation planning, recreational planning, and economics all factored into the enterprise of improving the life of the city. Vancouver businesses would be invited to assist with the costs of mounting exhibitions and supplying wood, upholstery, and other materials.

The new thinking in Vancouver was influenced beyond the city itself in that it reflected the international Modern Movement that was being promoted in the established periodicals of the time published in Europe and North America (*Progressive Architecture, Architectural Review, Journal of the Architectural Institute of Canada, Art and Architecture, L'architecture d'Aujourd'hui*). The work of architects Semmens and Simpson (e.g. Vancouver Public Library) and Sharp & Thompson Berwick Pratt (B.C. Hydro Building), for example, could be seen to have had precedents in projects or competition designs published widely and extolled for their exciting newness. Competitions held in the '50s open to an international field of designers (e.g. the Queen Elizabeth Theatre), planning reports (the Marsh Report's embracing of wholesale urban renewal of poorer areas of town), and town planning (Kitimat) signaled a desire for the local design community to join in the international avant-garde milieu.



Courtesy Western Homes & Living (Issue June 1961 showing Gardner Residence)

The new design in Vancouver was also a regional movement, where the American West Coast was powerful. Work from the American Pacific coast exerted a powerful influence on the design community in Vancouver, not only because it was closer and more accessible than even Winnipeg, but also because its culture and climate were more closely related to the conditions in post-war Vancouver. New popular periodicals such as *Sunset Magazine* and the Vancouver-based *Western Homes and Living*, as well as the influential much-published work of Neutra and others in the southwest, displayed glassy skeletal houses dramatically opened to their coastal landscapes. This post-war, open, residential imagery was perfectly suited to the landscape and suburban scale of

Vancouver's relatively underdeveloped south side. The magazines and local newspapers broadcast the new design as the appropriate backdrop for a new and better way of living, one that embraced the automobile, labour-saving devices, and mechanized building products (plywood, arborite, the 1952 "Silverwall" system of pre-stressed 4-foot-module plywood-panels). As a result of the new design idiom making it into the popular magazines, elite clients wanted architects to design for them the Modernist house: modular, skylighted, car-friendly, glassy, functional, and affordable. Less well-to-do citizens wanted the new type of house as well, buying houses built from stock plans that incorporated post-and-beam construction, vaulted ceilings, and easy access to private gardens and carports.

There was also a new focus on the style of living within the domestic realm, a style which included uncluttered spaces, modern appliances, and new spaces for leisure time. Landscape architects realized that these new home styles demanded a new concept of landscaping, particularly as architects placed an emphasis on the interplay of interior with exterior spaces. Activities and living needs that were once confined to inside the house were integrated into the domestic landscape.

Influenced by the interdisciplinary ideas epitomized by the Art in Living Group and the international and regional avant-garde design movements, local practitioners proceeded to design genuinely innovative buildings for which the city quickly became renown – most notably the striking commercial buildings downtown, and the post-and-beam houses and small commercial buildings in suburban settings. Post-and-beam work became an architectural icon of post-war Vancouver, signifying the liberal attitudes of a cosmopolitan middle class, residing almost wholly on the west side. It was design that was responsive to local conditions, influenced by Far-eastern material aesthetics (the use



Courtesy Western Homes & Living (December 1961.)

of wood in its natural state, showing it for what it was) and modular construction, and not captured under the heading of either any international or regional modernism. Much of the residential work and other notable singular buildings of the time (Underwood McKinley & Cameron's Park Board Headquarters) display a particularly sophisticated local approach to building in Vancouver. This local ferment led to a body of work that was published widely, including in leading American publications such as *Architectural Record*.

The Vancouver work was noticed not only because taken together it had a distinctness and newness born from a melding of local and international influences, but also because it photographed well in the landscapes it embraced.



Fred Amess reviewing community centre design, 1945. Courtesy of R. Windsor-Liscombe

4.0 Remaking Vancouver 1940-1970

Since Vancouver had by 1940 reached its natural boundaries (the City of Burnaby to its east; water to the north, south, and west) its remaking in the next three decades had two bases: densification and residential expansion into less easily developed lands, and areas at the periphery.

Densification of the West End began during the Second World War with the City edict allowing the division of its large houses into apartments. The pace of densification accelerated at the beginning of the '60s, when privately funded high-rise residential towers utterly transformed the district into an urban (that is, no longer suburban) community between the central business district and the recreational playgrounds of English Bay and Stanley Park.

Pressure to provide housing during and after the war also resulted in the construction of new subdivisions in areas such as Arbutus, Cambie, Oakridge and Renfrew – all merely the innermost suburbs of a general suburbanization of the Lower Mainland around the central financial and cultural hub of downtown Vancouver. When the war ended, more than a million Canadians in the armed forces were ready to return to peace-time life, creating a housing demand that the private sector could not meet. It was estimated that Vancouver alone required 45,000 new housing units. In 1945 the federal government responded by creating the Central [later Canada] Mortgage and Housing Corporation [CMHC] to help meet these housing needs.



*People disembarking from ship.
Courtesy of the Vancouver Archives CVA1184-3494.*

Such housing developments were also partly a result of a number of government reports being carried out in the 1940s in an attempt to deal with the housing needs and which had a significant effect locally. The 1944 Curtis Report (one of six reports by the federal Committee on Post-War Reconstruction), for example, highlighted the need for government intervention in the provision of low-income housing and comprehensive urban planning.

The post-war building boom created a situation in which entire neighbourhoods were being constructed, or re-constructed, at once. In many areas spread over the city three-storey walkups were built, and there

was infilling on building lots funded by the federal government. CMHC funded the construction of small bungalows immediately after the war, presaging later larger CMHC housing developments. Examples of the larger schemes were the 600-unit Renfrew Heights housing, and the Little Mountain housing at Main and 35th, the first large-scale post-war housing developments sanctioned by the city - both not unexpectedly located on Vancouver's east side.

The expansion of the economy after the Second World War featured a significant transfer of wealth into the middle and lower income levels, creating a pool of disposable income that was to fuel the purchasing of consumer goods, including housing on land that was relatively inexpensive. In these decades, the city's suburban communities were bolstered not only by new house construction, but by the building of privately funded churches, synagogues and seniors' homes, and publicly-funded community and recreation centres, schools, and local branches of the Vancouver Public Library – all of which reflected the new thinking around the concept of healthy residential life. These usually modest sized buildings offer some important examples of simple modernist wood construction (for example, the Collingwood and Dunbar Branch Libraries). The Vancouver Parks Board instigated the development of community facilities in the city and the provision of public parks and open spaces, access to the waterfront and street tree planting during the several decades following the Second World War, adopting its first Community Centre policy in 1945. The Parks Board persuaded City Council to institutionalize the provision of park space in all new housing developments.

The city's central role for the Lower Mainland and Fraser Valley was cemented by three developments in governance. Firstly, Vancouver was settling into what would be a long reign of the Non-Partisan Association-dominated council (1937-72). The electoral system in Vancouver had changed in 1936 from a ward system to a citywide system, which in turn created a small council and contributed to the creation of a business-oriented, pro-development political elite. The main characteristics of this type of government were a less-than-powerful mayor, a small number of city-

wide elected councillors, and a strong city manager. The result was the repeal of downtown building height restrictions in 1956, partly at the behest of real estate developers working to take advantage of the end of shortages in construction materials, improved economic conditions, and building technologies. Secondly, the provincial government granted the city the Vancouver Charter, which meant that it could make and change zoning bylaws and encourage redevelopment without bowing to provincial regulations or intervention. Thirdly, in 1967, the Greater Vancouver Regional District was created, which sought to coordinate essential services economically, efficiently and equitably at a regional level, and which had the practical advantage of coordinating industrial, commercial, and residential lands in the larger region with the acknowledged central financial and cultural centre being Vancouver, whose business district expanded westward to accommodate the influx of corporations establishing offices and head offices in the city. The downtown buildings designed in this period – both the cultural facilities (Vancouver Museum and Planetarium, Queen Elizabeth Theatre) and the corporate buildings (BC Electric, Burrard Building, Westcoast Transmission) display, with their Modernist forms and details, both regional and international aspirations and horizons.

Already an essentially suburban city, Vancouver in the decades after the war was rebuilt with the automobile in mind. Malls, motels, parkades, and drive-in restaurants all helped to reshape the cityscape. Everything from custom houses to public housing, office towers to public institutions embraced the demands of the car culture. Commercial buildings and their signage were redesigned with view from the road in mind.

The 1960s saw extensive debate and innovative responses to the issues of the urban environment and its liveability that had been broached in earlier planning reports such as the Marsh Report. It was in this period that a twenty-year program was instigated for Vancouver's redevelopment, encompassing transportation, low-cost housing, and downtown revitalization. The new Georgia

Viaduct and the MacLean Park, Skeena Terrace, and Raycam housing projects were just the first stages of this planned wholesale redevelopment of much of the east side of the city in order to accomplish enhanced automobile transit into the city and the replacement of so-called substandard housing. This positivist vision for a better city was emblematic of the times internationally, but tended not to be the result of a participatory process; the vision could be viewed as having classist and racist overtones. Private property was being accorded differing levels of respect depending on which side of Main Street that property lay. The failure of this City- and developer-driven urban renewal plans (the Freeway Debates put an end to them) signalled a broader class and race ethos to remaking Vancouver from then on into the present day.

The new design and the thinking in the 1940s, '50s, and '60s was not a single coherent movement either internationally or in Vancouver.

But all the work and thought did convey optimism in the potential of design and planning to effect social improvement. Life could be made better through better design. Vancouver was sufficiently

connected to the Pacific region and to the international scene (not least

because of migrations to the city by design professionals) to have participated in the development of the international discourse. But it was also sufficiently isolated that it could develop a distinct strand of that new thinking, and remake the city in a highly particular manner rooted in local conditions and distinctly West Coast.



Courtesy Western Homes & Living (Issue May 1959)

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