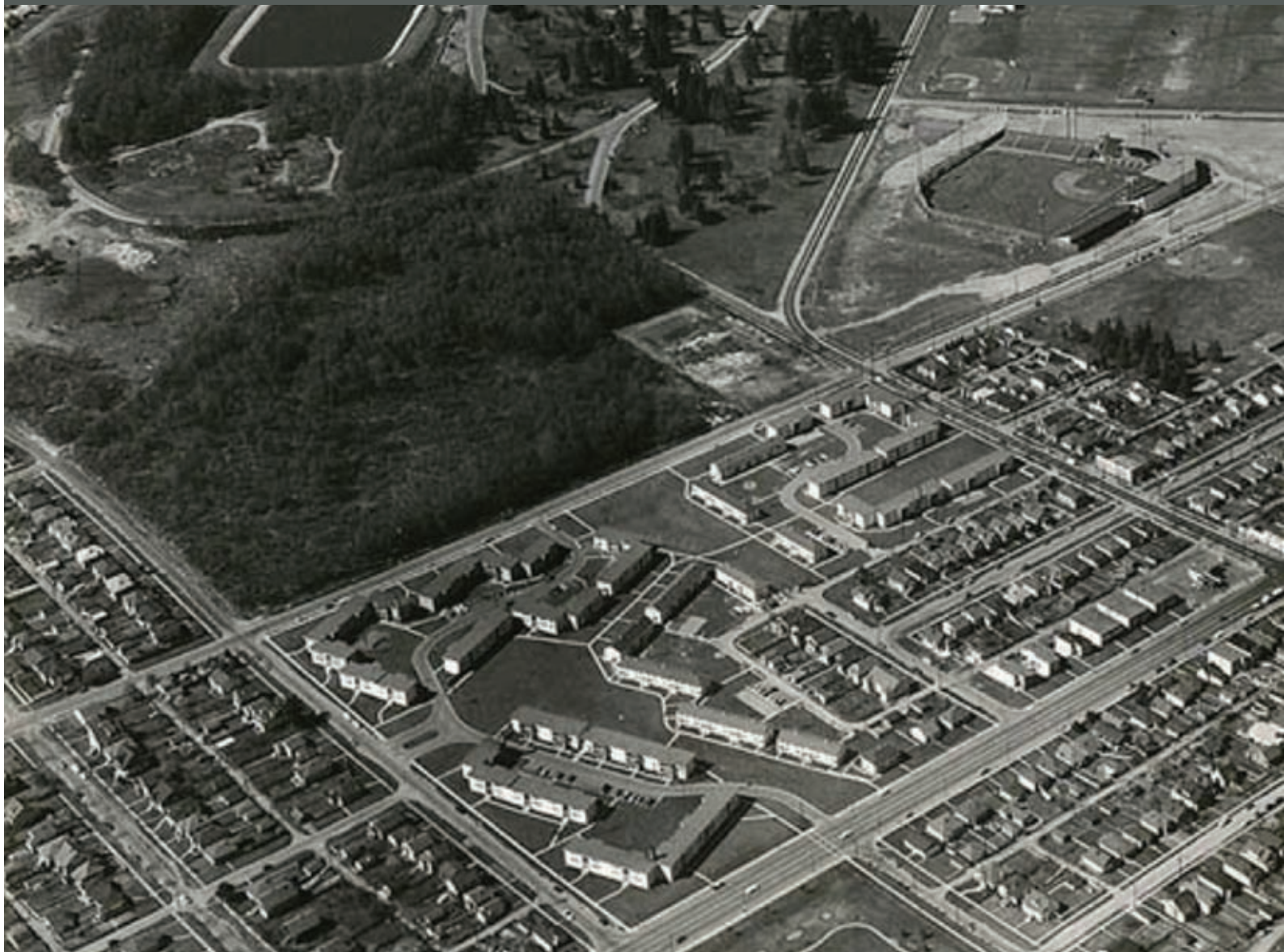


LITTLE MOUNTAIN HOUSING SITE

STATEMENT OF SIGNIFICANCE

FINAL FEBRUARY 27, 2012



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INTRODUCTION

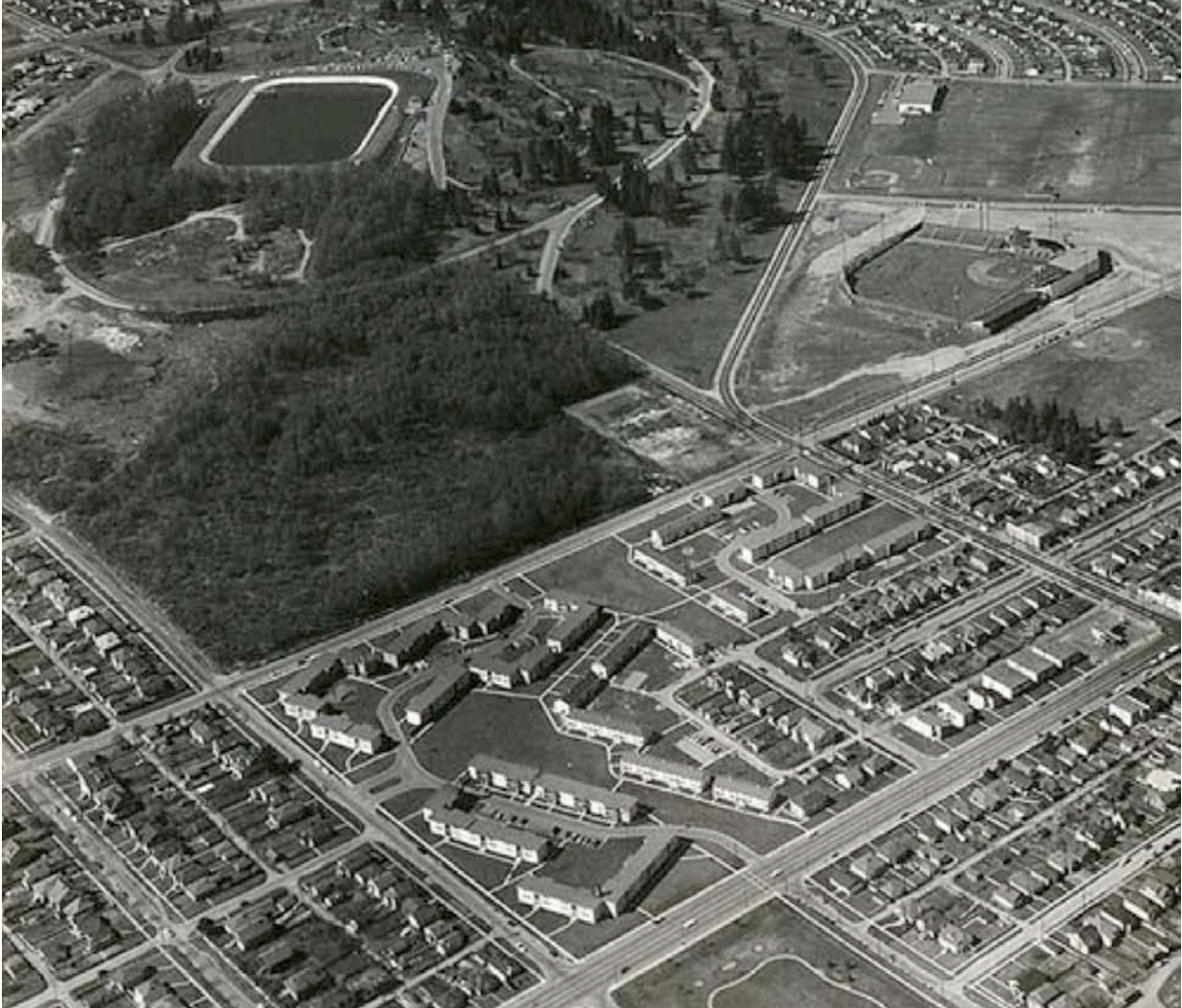
The Little Mountain Housing Site is located between Main and Ontario Streets, and 33rd and 37th Avenues in the Riley Park neighbourhood of Vancouver, on traditional Musqueam First Nation territory. The City of Vancouver had acquired and assembled the site by the late 1940s and earmarked it for an apartment development that never transpired. Recognizing its possession of a vacant, large parcel of land, the City, via the Vancouver Housing Authority, first offered the site for a public housing scheme in 1950, when the municipal, provincial and federal governments agreed to construct approximately 200 new social housing units. While many factors, including the Korean War and numerous protests by property owners and builders, delayed the construction of the housing project until 1953, it opened in 1954 with 224 housing units. The Canada Mortgage and Housing Corporation (CMHC) owned the site from the time of its development until it was transferred to the Province in 2007. All but one of the buildings has since been demolished, in preparation for the redevelopment of the site into a mix of market and non-market housing. The single building that remains on the site currently sits in isolation, and later alterations have compromised its architectural character and integrity.

Through this Statement of Significance, the Little Mountain Housing site has been assessed for its heritage value and character-defining elements, and it has been determined that it is valued for its origins as traditional Musqueam First Nation territory; its history as Vancouver's first major social housing project; and its site planning, including its remnant layout and landscaping.



Little Mountain Housing Site, January 2012

STATEMENT OF SIGNIFICANCE: LITTLE MOUNTAIN HOUSING SITE



Site Aerial, courtesy City of Vancouver

Name: Little Mountain Housing Site

Location: Bounded by Main Street, Ontario Street, 33rd Avenue and 37th Avenue, Vancouver

Architect: Sharp, Thompson, Berwick & Pratt, with Semmens Simpson

Date of Completion: 1954

Description of Historic Place

The Little Mountain Housing site is located between Main and Ontario Streets, and 33rd and 37th Avenues, within the Riley Park neighbourhood of Vancouver on traditional Musqueam First Nation territory. This development was the first large-scale modern social housing project in Vancouver, containing more than two hundred suites on the 15-acre site. Its notable site features included its strict residential use, composed of clusters of walk-up apartments and rowhouses, and the austere nature of the buildings, which were designed by the prominent local architecture firms of Sharp, Thompson, Berwick & Pratt, along with Semmens Simpson.

Heritage Value of Historic Place

The Little Mountain Housing site, completed in 1954, was significant as the first large-scale modern social housing project in Vancouver. Recognizing the acute housing shortage immediately following World War II, the second Hotel Vancouver was opened up to provide emergency housing for 1,200 families. This temporary measure necessitated a permanent solution to the lack of affordable veteran housing in the city. In 1946, the Central (now Canada) Mortgage & Housing Corporation (CMHC) had been created, and it rapidly evolved into a key player in the residential housing industry. The Vancouver Housing Authority (VHA) first recommended the city-owned 15-acre Little Mountain site for low-income housing development in 1950. Budgetary restraints, brought about by the Korean War, briefly halted the development, and eventually the planned masonry structures were redesigned as frame-and-stucco buildings. Sustained protests by builders and property owners opposed to taxpayer-funded subsidized housing further threatened to derail the project. By the time construction was underway in the summer of 1953, the CMHC, as owner and lead developer, had increased the maximum allowable incomes and rents for residents of the development, in an effort to recover additional costs. The project, which had originally been focussed on the provision of low-income housing, opened as a mixed-income development. The site featured thirty-seven buildings, including clusters of three-level walk-up apartment buildings and rowhouses, containing a total of 224 housing units. The buildings remained under the ownership of the federal government for more than fifty years before the site was transferred to the Province in 2007. All but one of the buildings have been demolished as the site is prepared for redevelopment into a mix of market-rate and social housing units.

The Little Mountain Housing site is also valued for its mid-century modern planning techniques. Although the buildings were limited to three storeys, the site followed the “Towers in the Park” ideal popularized by Le Corbusier, which consisted of generous open space between buildings and a strictly residential use. This single-use and dispersed form of development challenged the traditional and dense urban grid, which had been unilaterally deemed overcrowded and dilapidated, and thereby unfit for the healthy growth of the modern city. This new form of development was made possible by the automobile, which was just becoming commonplace by the time the site was planned; the gently curving streets on the site are a testament to then-new method of urban mobility. The Little Mountain Housing site serves as a reminder of mid-century best practices in site planning and design; however the site also demonstrates the failure of housing projects that were built in isolation from the urban fabric.

The Little Mountain Housing site is additionally significant for its association with the prolific local architecture firms of Sharp, Thompson, Berwick & Pratt, along with Semmens Simpson. Founded in 1908 by G.L.T. Sharp and Charles J. Thompson, Sharp & Thompson were joined by young architecture graduates Robert A.D. Berwick and Charles Edward Pratt in 1937. The firm then altered its focus from traditional to modern – gaining significant attention for many of their projects through the 1950s and 1960s. Harold Nelson Semmens and Douglas C. Simpson formed their successful Vancouver partnership, known as Semmens Simpson, in 1949. The firm is credited with designing some of the city’s most impressive Modern works, including the Marwell Building, the B.C. Sugar Refinery office and the former Vancouver Public Library building. The two firms collaborated on the design of the Little Mountain Housing site. The severe lack of detailing on the buildings, and their starkly-designed appearance, helped to reduce construction costs and ensured the units retained an institutional appearance.

LITTLE MOUNTAIN HOUSING SITE, VANCOUVER

Character-Defining Elements

The key elements that define the heritage character of the Little Mountain Housing site include its:

- location between Main Street, Ontario Street, 33rd Avenue and 37th Avenue, within the Riley Park neighbourhood of Vancouver;
- mid-century modern site planning techniques as expressed by the generous open space between buildings and the gently curving street pattern, in contrast to the surrounding, orthogonal street grid;
- mature trees located throughout the site, which reflect the original placement of the buildings; and
- remaining two-storey stucco-clad housing unit located at the northeast corner of the site, featuring a side-gabled roof, symmetrical fenestration pattern and three internal red brick chimneys.

RESEARCH SUMMARY

LOCATION: Bounded by Main Street, Ontario Street, 33rd Avenue and 37th Avenue, Vancouver

NAME: Little Mountain Housing Site

ARCHITECT: Sharp, Thompson, Berwick & Pratt, with Semmens Simpson

SOURCE: *The New Spirit: Modern Architecture in Vancouver, 1938-1963*

COMPLETION DATE: 1954

SOURCE: City of Vancouver Water Permits

REFERENCES:

Publications:

- *Building the West: The Early Architects of British Columbia*. Donald Luxton, ed. Talonbooks, 2nd ed., 2007.
- *Form Follows Fiasco: Why Modern Architecture Hasn't Worked*. Peter Blake. Little, Brown & Co. 1978.
- *Houses for All: The Struggle for Social Housing in Vancouver, 1919-1950*. Wade, Jill. Vancouver: UBC Press. 1994.
- *The New Spirit: Modern Architecture in Vancouver, 1938-1963*. Liscombe, Rhodri Windsor. Montréal: Canadian Centre for Architecture and Vancouver: Douglas & McIntyre. 1997.

Water Permits:

- City of Vancouver Water Permits: Listed Owner – Vancouver Housing Authority; Applicant – Houston, A.; Superintendent – McGrady, R.G.; April 5, 1954.



Site Plan, courtesy City of Vancouver