

Canadian Pacific Right of Way

80 Powell Street, Vancouver, BC



Heritage Impact Assessment

Introduction

Site and Location

The Site is located within the Gastown HA-2 zoning district on the south side of Powell Street at the eastern end of the block between Columbia Street and Carrall Street. The site is a surviving portion of the Canadian Pacific Railway right of way between False Creek and Burrard Inlet developed in the late 1880s. It has been inactive since 1932.

The surrounding built-form context includes a mix of mid and low rise buildings built in the late 19th and early 20th century with a varied number of purposes including rooming houses, hotels and distribution warehouses for a diverse range of goods from groceries to building supplies and ship chandlery.



The site outlined in red is located on the south side of Powell Street one lot west of Columbia Street
Source Apple Maps

Background and History

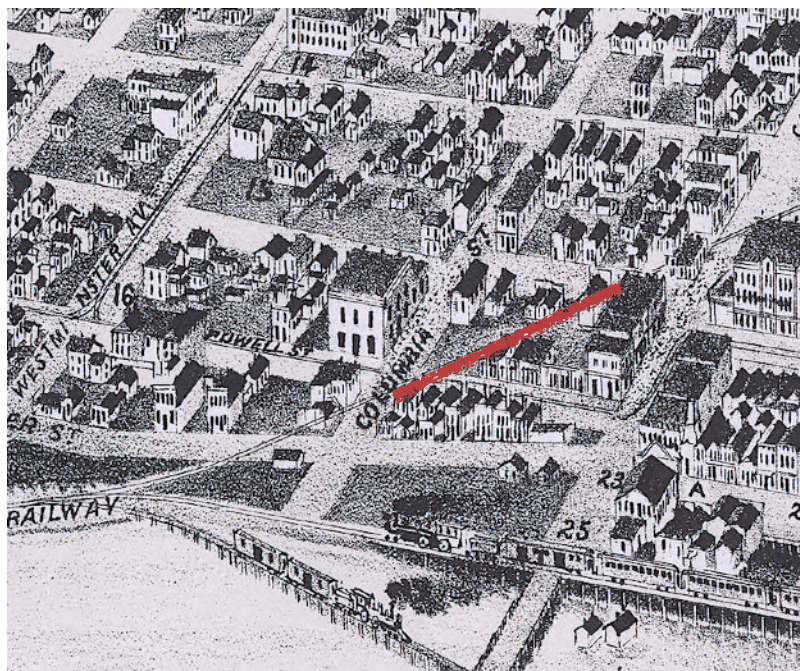
The arrival of the Canadian Pacific Railway (CPR) on Burrard Inlet in the mid-1880s would drive the development of Vancouver through the end of the 19th century and into much of the 20th century. The location of their terminal station, repair shops and freight yards had a huge influence on the use and function of the False Creek and Burrard Inlet waterfronts, the layout of city streets and much more.

In the late 20th century significant changes in transportation and goods movement left large portions of the CPR's False Creek and Burrard Inlet holdings redundant and ripe for redevelopment. Today, apart from some rail operation on Burrard Inlet, a fragment of the former repair shops repurposed for the Roundhouse Community Centre and the former passenger terminal on Cordova there is little tangible evidence of the CPR's presence on the downtown peninsula.

The Right of Way

The south shore of Burrard Inlet with the passenger terminal, rail yards and shipping piers was the operational side of the business while the facilities to maintain, repair and provision the engines and rolling stock were located on the False Creek side of the peninsula. A second freight yard was located on Pender Street adjacent to Chinatown. The connection to Burrard Inlet was easily accomplished by utilizing the low lying area between today's Carrall and Columbia Streets once used by the Indigenous population as a portage route between the two bodies of water.

A single track through the shallow valley connected to the CPR mainline on the inlet and was used to shunt rolling stock between False Creek and Burrard Inlet. The line was generally not used to deliver goods to businesses along its route though an addition to the McLennan and McFeely building across the lane was designed to accommodate a short spur.



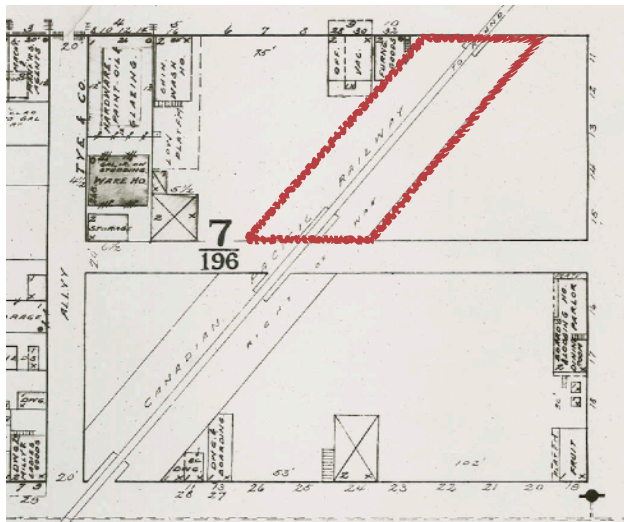
The 1890s bird's eye view of Vancouver shows the right of way and the early development of the Gastown area. The large building at the corner of Columbia and Powell is the Oppenheimer warehouse, today's Warehouse Studios

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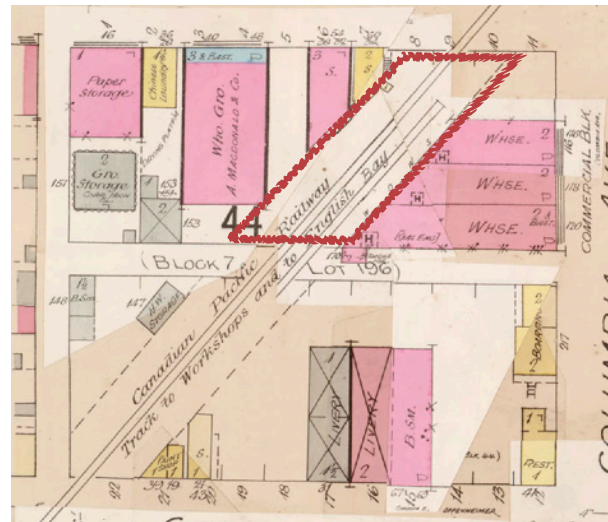
Service on the street level connection ceased in 1932 with the opening of the Dunsmuir Tunnel allowing trains to move under downtown to Burrard Inlet, significantly improving the flow of traffic on the streets. With the trains rerouted the right of way remained open as an informal route for pedestrians and a few delivery trucks.

The right of way remains as a civic artifact visible in aerial photographs, recalled in the alignment of International Village and the angled footprints of buildings along the corridor.

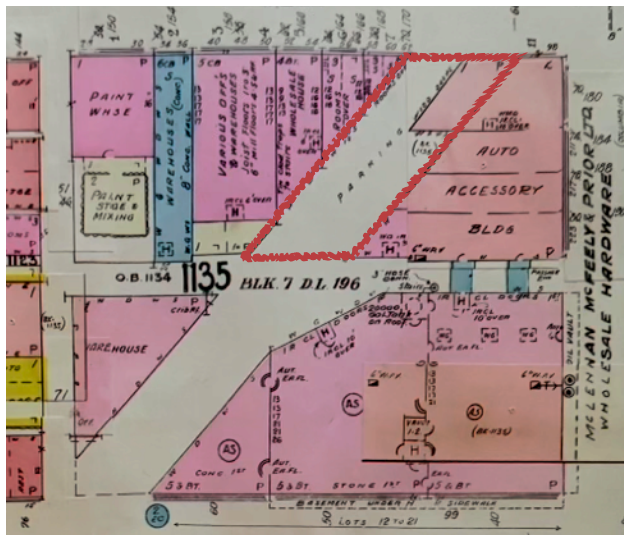
The parcel that is 80 Powell Street has remained open and undeveloped throughout the settlement and development of the surrounding city.



The 1889 Dakin fire insurance plan shows the right of way and the sparse development on the east side of the block



The 1901 fire insurance plan showing development along the right of way such as the original portion of 211 Columbia and 52 Powell



The 1940 fire insurance plan 211 Columbia is shown with a single storey shed added to the rear of the building



Aerial view of the site showing the existing condition

The Right of Way and the Built Form Context



Looking north through the site to Powell Street



Looking south from Powell to the lane.



Across Columbia Street at Powell is the Fleck Brothers complex, converted to housing in the 1980s opposite the Warehouse Studios housed in the former Oppenheimer Brothers warehouse



Looking south along Columbia Street with the Warehouse Studio and 211 Columbia



Looking north along Columbia Street with the Anchor/City Hotel and Fleck Brothers. The glass addition to the Anchor/City Hotel can be seen



On the west side the immediate neighbouring buildings are 58 Powell Street (1910), 56 Powell (c.1890) and 52 Powell (1909) to the west. Seen in the gap is the former McLennan and McFeely warehouse at Columbia and Cordova

Heritage Significance and Character

The site is important for its association with the Canadian Pacific Railway and company's role in the development of the Gastown district and Vancouver. The right of way's key character defining elements are

- its non alignment to the city grid
- its visibility on maps and aerial photographs
- the angled foot prints of the neighbouring buildings along each edge
- the site's openness allowing views through to the adjacent blocks

The Proposal

In developing this proposal the team conducted a comprehensive analysis of the site, considered its historic significance and its impact on the heritage and fabric of Gastown. The proposal is relying on the relaxation provisions of section 3.2.1.3 of the HA-2 District Schedule and HA-2 Design Guidelines. Section 3.1.3 of the HA-2 guidelines provides for the consideration of an increase in the maximum permitted building height provided context and urban design criteria are met. This is discussed in detail in the Design Guideline Analysis and Urban Design Rationale.

The intent statement, which seeks *“to recognize the area’s special status and to ensure the maintenance of Gastown’s turn-of-the-century historical and architectural character,”* is central to this proposal. A key consideration is the significance of the site’s historic use as a rail corridor as one of the defining elements that shaped Gastown’s architectural and urban character.

See the *Design Guideline Analysis and Design Rationale*

The Site’s Unique Context

The unique character of the site dictated a unique response. The property at 80 Powell Street has never been built upon which presents an opportunity to create something that stands in contrast to the existing neighbourhood much like newer additions to existing Gastown buildings which are contemporary in form and material to contrast with the original. This combined with the site’s off grid orientation within the context of Gastown led to the creation of a distinct urban form and public realm that manages to highlight the former right-of-way and its significance.

The building’s design is intended to celebrate the historic right-of-way, ensuring its presence remains visible and legible:

- its orientation aligns with the former rail corridor, creating views along the right of way through each end of the site
- at ground level, the high ceiling of the second floor provides a unique sense of openness and transparency to the ground plane while the generous separation with the neighbouring buildings on the western edge will provide a clear and distinct view through the site
- the building’s urban form will serve as a marker of the historic right of way ensuring that the site’s past is integrated into its future
- at sidewalk level attention is drawn to the heritage resource through the innovative use of materials to mark the right of way on the property and beyond into the public realm.

Architectural Approach & HA-2 Guidelines

The HA-2 Design Guidelines offer very specific and detailed guidance for the rehabilitation and conservation of existing buildings. This degree of clarity is most helpful for such projects, however this development is unique in the neighbourhood context.

The HA-2 Design Guidelines emphasize that new development should contribute to the heritage character of Gastown without imitating the past: *“New buildings should not be designed in a pseudo-historic style, replicate existing buildings, or buildings that once existed, as this erodes the value of authentic heritage buildings. Rather, a new architectural vocabulary is encouraged that complements the heritage character of original Gastown buildings.”*

The site may be the last opportunity to significantly honour Gastown’s rail history and for this proposal the goal is to create a striking urban intervention that highlights and celebrates the right-of-way’s presence and *“achieve a balance between the compatibility of new work and its distinguishability from authentic heritage fabric.”*

The guidelines recognize the potential for height increases where architectural, contextual, and urban design considerations support such an approach. These principles have directly shaped the proposal, ensuring it aligns with Gastown’s evolving character while maintaining a connection to its historic context.

The proposed form is determined by the intent to have the right of way remain as open and transparent as possible thus dictating a height increase.

Height and Urban Design Considerations and Impacts

With respect to height, the guidelines emphasize preserving Gastown’s sawtooth skyline, where buildings range from 2 to 13 storeys. The public realm study for Gastown identifies Powell Street as the eastern gateway to the historic area and the 1909 Dominion Building at the western edge of the district provides the inspiration for the height relaxation for 80 Powell Street as the bookend at the eastern edge.

For much of its length the right of way is not visible in a meaningful way to the passerby as it is hidden behind fencing and landscaping elements that denote the private nature of those spaces. The height relaxation allows the majority of the right of way on the project site to remain open and clearly defined as well as providing guests and restaurant patrons on the upper floors long views over the its entirety.

Light and shadow analysis show little impact on neighbouring buildings given the angle of the right of way and the orientation of the proposed building.

At ground level the proposal does not impact the neighbouring heritage buildings in any significant fashion. The height of the second floor matches the roof line of 211 Columbia Street allowing views into the right of way and eliminates any overlook concerns. The proposed free standing green wall on the western side matches the fenestration of a neighbouring structure’s window arrangement providing light and views into the right of way.

The ownership of the immediate neighbouring building to the west on Powell Street offers an opportunity to open the blank wall for public activity such as a coffee shop or other casual retail providing further activation to the right of way.

The height of the second floor and the resulting openness leaves the Columbia Street building’s west wall clear of obstructions allowing it to retain its historic relationship in defining the right of way’s eastern edge.

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The site's heritage value is proposed to be commemorated within a hard-scaped plaza accessed from Powell Street and the lane. The proposed surface treatment draws inspiration from the original surface materials and is designed to recall the previous use in a meaningful and robust contemporary manner. A proposed extension of the landscape elements beyond the property line serves to reinforce the significance of this civic artifact. The water feature and planting is a acknowledgement of the land before settlement

For additional details refer to the landscape plan.

Summary

The Canadian Pacific Railway right of way is an important civic artifact that recalls the significant role the railroad played in developing the place called Vancouver. The opportunity to preserve, highlight and celebrate the artifact in a meaningful way is at the root of this proposal. The form of the building, the openness of the ground plane surrounding the building along with the care and attention to the landscape design is all about preserving the right of way, rendering it visible and accessible.

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