

A Brief History of ‘Little Italy’

By John Atkin, Civic Historian

Introduction

This paper was prepared for the City of Vancouver in response to a proposal to designate a portion of Commercial Drive as “Little Italy.”

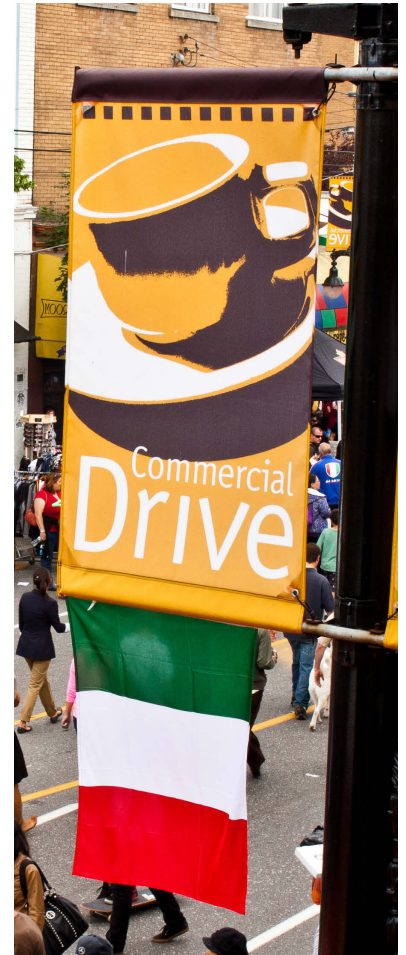
There are strong connections between Commercial Drive and the city’s Italian community. A number of Italian businesses are located on the Drive – serving to enrich the street as a local and regional destination. Each summer Commercial Drive is also the scene of the annual Italian Days festival – a popular day-long event celebrating Italian culture.

Yet while the Drive is often referred to, nowadays, as “Little Italy” – it is not the original “Little Italy” per se; nor, perhaps, is it the only one. Indeed, in the course of researching the Italian community and immigration to Vancouver it is clear that where and what 'Little Italy' is, is actually a broader and more diffuse concept. The residential and commercial aspects of the community are spread over a wide geographic area of the city much more than the current idea of 'Little Italy' would allow. This brief history attempts to place the idea of ‘Little Italy’ within the larger picture of Vancouver immigration and development patterns.

Research was done by consulting a diverse range of materials from published histories, UBC and SFU theses, newspaper articles and recorded oral histories. Census information was used to determine population. City directories, online and at the Archives, were used to determine the date and location of businesses on the Drive, Hastings and other streets. Businesses were determined by name and owner. Some businesses listed but without a store front - doctors, and lawyers for example - were not included in the lists. A note about population: some published sources have confused the population figures for the City of Vancouver and Vancouver CMA (Core Metropolitan Area) leading to an inflated population shown for Italians within the city itself.

Early History

The Italian community has been a part of Vancouver since before the city was incorporated in 1886. Some of the first Italians in the area worked building the Canadian Pacific Railway’s extension from Port Moody to Coal Harbour.



The first substantial wave of Italian immigration took place between 1896 and 1914. As Patricia Wood notes in her book *Nationalism from the Margins: Italians in Alberta and British Columbia*, “At the time, of a total [city] population of around 27,000 [in the 1890s] there were only about one hundred Italians.” But by the early 1900s that number had increased to 1,500, with many settling in today’s Strathcona, between Main Street and Clark Drive along East Georgia, Union, Atlantic and Prior Streets, close to the City of Vancouver’s works yards at Main and Union Streets which provided employment.

The Italian population grew large enough that in August 1900 restaurateur Agostina Ferrera was appointed to serve as the Italian consul; previously consular services had been handled out of Halifax. With this growth in the Italian population a petition was made to the Catholic Diocese for a church to serve the community and in 1905 the Church of the Sacred Heart opened its doors at the corner of Keefer and Campbell Avenue; then, the heart of the Italian community. The church’s mission was to provide support to Italian families new to Canada, and often assisted them to find work and help them adjust to life in Vancouver.



Thus, in the early 20th century, Strathcona was ‘Little Italy.’ The neighbourhood was home to a number of pioneering Italian businesses including, Crosetti’s on Main Street, Benny’s Italian Market, Minichiello’s Grocery (later Union Market) and Giuriatti’s, all on Union Street. Owing to a favourable business climate, a few businesses also moved premises within the area. The Battistoni family’s Venice Bakery opened on Princess Avenue south of Prior in 1908, but within a few short years, moved north to Union Street and larger premises. Tosi Italian Food Importers also outgrew their original premises on Union Street and moved to Main Street in 1930. Bosa Foods, which started in a house in Strathcona, moved out to Victoria Drive in 1956.



The 1911 census showed 2500 residents of Italian descent living in Vancouver (this figure includes the former municipalities of South Vancouver and Point Grey) and by 1931 that number would grow to 3590. (Note that research by a number of scholars have shown that early civic population numbers may vary by as much as 30% from the census data due to a number of factors, including how the census was recorded).

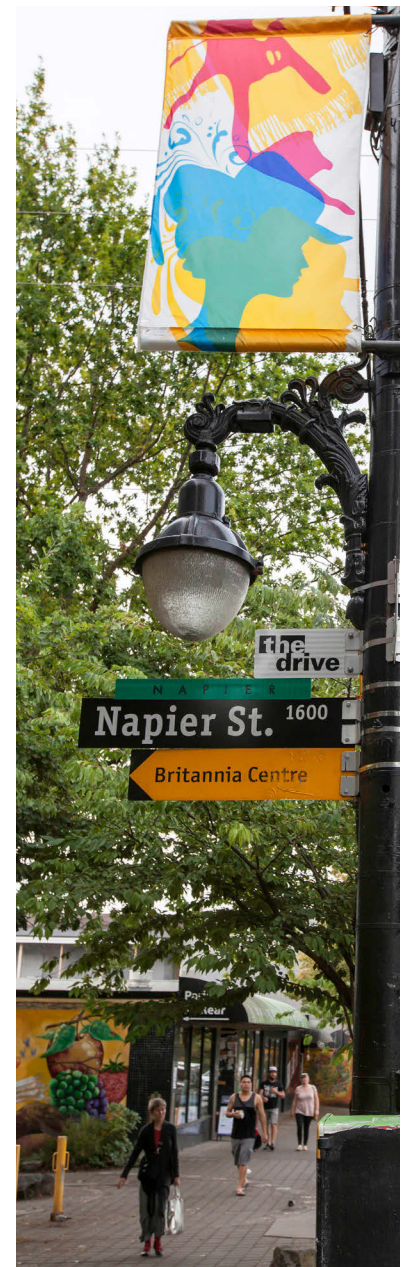
Post-war Migration

The next and larger wave of Italian immigration happened after the close of the Second World War between 1947 and 1973. The population would grow from 5,095 in 1951 to 19,020 by 1971. Outgrowing the original Strathcona community and pushed out by redevelopment plans for the area, the Italian community spread out over a large area of East Vancouver and didn't, as Stephen Fielding notes, re-establish "a core residential space where migrants rubbed shoulders." This meant that by the early 1960s the residential spread extended south from Strathcona to Broadway and east to Boundary Road. In that decade, 47% of the Italian population could be found in the census tract areas east of Main to Boundary Road and north of Broadway with the largest concentration (15%) being east of Victoria Drive. During this period 70.7% of the Greater Vancouver Italian population still lived within the City of Vancouver limits.

A study of the census tracts from the 1960s found that though the residential spread reached North Burnaby, the highest concentration of Italian households could be found between Commercial Drive and Renfrew Street from Adanac to First Avenue. Most importantly, for the purpose of this research, the census tracts show that *both* Hastings Street, between Lakewood and Renfrew, and Commercial Drive between the 1000 and 1900 blocks, had become the commercial hearts of the community.

Further Diffusion

Although many of the Italian businesses on Commercial Drive and East Hastings remained, the larger Italian population continued to move eastward. Three decades later, the Vancouver Sun noted in 2011 that "only seven per cent of the residents immediately surrounding north Commercial Drive claim an Italian origin. Metro Vancouver's roughly 75,000 Italian-Canadians, representing 3.6 per cent of the city's population, are now spread throughout the metropolis" and that a solid Italian community of about 15% of the residents could be found along East Hastings to the west of Renfrew Street.



Italian Businesses in East Vancouver: A Closer Look

The city directories provide a useful snapshot of Commercial Drive and Hastings Street through the decades. In 1952, the directories show one Italian-owned business, the Shoe Hospital at 1314A Commercial Drive operated by Fiori Marini. By name, the directories show five Italians listed as living on the street between the 900 and 2200 blocks of Commercial Drive. These and other residents were accommodated in apartments above the street retail, though at the northern end of the street at Venables there were a few purpose built apartment buildings.

At the same time the directories show that Olympic Tailors at 2425 E. Hastings, and the Olympic Barbershop at 2369 E. Hastings, are the pioneer Italian businesses on that street. Olympia Tailors opened on the street in the early 1940s after moving from Vernon Street in Strathcona.

In 1962, the directories show an emerging core of Italian businesses on Commercial Drive between Charles and Second Avenue. Nick's Spaghetti House opened in 1957 and is located in the 600 block away from the growing retail core.

The Vancouver Sun noted in a May 1962 Canadian Press article that parts of Hastings Street and Commercial Drive with "their Italian shops, clubs, movies, and restaurants made up the city's 'Little Italy.' At the same time, the directories illustrate that the Italian businesses were part of the diversity of retail that could be found on both streets that also included a number of Chinese-run grocery stores and the occasional Portuguese business.

By 1968, the directories show there were 35 Italian businesses between the 1000 to 1900 blocks of the Drive. Newcomers included travel agents, restau-



rants, plumbing and heating, clothing and shoe stores, and billiard halls. At the same time there are a few Portuguese businesses that begin to appear on the Drive, reflecting the earlier pattern of immigration and business in Strathcona.

That same year the directories list 20 Italian businesses between the 2100 and 2600 blocks of Hastings which included a similar mix of retail to the Drive and added music shops and photo studios.

Outside of the two main retail streets there were also small clusters of Italian-owned businesses on Nanaimo Street between William and Kitchener - the Rezullo Food market opened there in 1962, and First Avenue is where some of the city's early pizza parlours could be found. Similarly, small clusters of shops were found on Renfrew at First Avenue with markets, restaurants, and food shops and a smaller group of shops near Hastings included Italian Sporting Goods which opened in 1969.

Notwithstanding the two core areas of Italian business that were active at the time, the 1970s saw the name "Little Italy" more tightly associated with the Drive. A survey of local newspapers and guidebooks shows that, by mid-decade, references to 'Little Italy' are almost exclusively tied to Commercial Drive. This is most likely due to the number of coffee shops and restaurants that had opened on the Drive vs Hastings, contributing to a community feel. In 1977, following the success of the popular Greek Days festival on West Broadway, the first Italian Days celebration was held on the Drive – further solidifying the street as the symbolic core of the community. Italian Days was held on the Drive until the mid-1980s when it was moved to the Italian Cultural Centre. It was recently brought back to the Drive and is held over 10 blocks of the street in mid-June each year.

A survey through the directories of 1996 (one of the last years these volumes were produced), shows how strong the retail was on both East Hastings and Commercial Drive. Interestingly, by this time the numbers of Italian businesses were about equal on both streets.

A present-day survey of the street shows that Commercial Drive is still home to a number of Italian businesses, including long-established coffee shops, food stores, and restaurants. Other businesses have evolved - a former tailor's shop does coffee and a former TV repair shop sold ice cream - with their second and third generation owners. Rezullo's has added a coffee bar to attract new customers.



At the same time, the street has also become known for its cultural diversity. For example in 1993, Kevin Griffin noted that “Commercial Drive still retains several Italian delis and coffee bars, but the predominant Italian atmosphere of the street is now becoming a more multicultural one...”

The “other” ‘Little Italy’ on Hastings Street has also become less concentrated. Changes on the street over the past few decades, including the redevelopment of older buildings, has led to a reduction in the number of Italian businesses. The present-day core of Italian business is now found mostly around Nanaimo and Hastings with Sorrento Barbers, Blanca Maria, Hastings Dental, La Rinascente Imports, Rose’s Children’s Wear, Ugo and Joe’s, Felicia Restaurant and Star Tile remaining. Olympia Tailors, the oldest Italian business on Hastings, closed in 2015.

The Drive lends itself to celebration, unlike Hastings with its broader right-of-way and higher traffic volumes. It is still considered the symbolic heart of the Italian (and Portuguese*) community, who descend from afar to the street and its cafes for sporting events which prompt the occasional informal parade whenever their team is in the World Cup.

The idea of ‘Little Italy’ being tied to Commercial Drive has present-day resonance, though historically, the name referred to a much broader geography. Older residents still recall the Strathcona area as ‘Little Italy’ for both its concentration of residents and businesses, while still other community members will remember the time when East Hastings was another ‘Little Italy.’ And today, as always, the Drive is home not only to a number of Italian businesses – but also to shops and services that reflect cultural traditions from around the world.

**the last census noted that there were 10,000 Canadians of Portuguese descent east of Commercial Drive towards Renfrew.*



Voices from the community:

"I remember Strathcona. I lived at 900 block Keefer, just below Campbell Avenue, and these Italians guys were way up on the hill. It was a society difference; I was at the bottom of the hill. From Campbell Avenue it flattened out. That's where Little Italy was: Prior street, Union Street, Georgia Street—that's where most of the Italians lived. Then we moved into Chinatown on the 200 block at Keefer and Georgia Street. I think at Keefer and Pender was where the Chinese men sold their chicken." - Joe-Comparelli

Commercial Drive was at its most Italian in the late 1960s and 1970s, the successor to European/German Robsonstrasse and Chinatown as an exotic destination for shopping and dining in what was, still, a very British-Canadian city (Greek Kitsilano flourished during the same years). In the popular imagination, Italians were a kind of happy, picturesque folk, eager for a street party, a sea change from the restraint of traditional Vancouver, and of traditional Commercial Drive, too. Also arising at that time was an edgy counterculture, politically hard left, adding to The Drive's burgeoning reputation as the centre for the city's lesbian population. - Michael Kluckner Vanishing Vancouver

Francesco Murdocco opened Cafe Calabria in 1976. "Commercial Drive was full of Italians in the 1970s. People would gather at the restaurants to dine and dance, and there were a lot of coffee shops where older Italian guys played briscola cards, so there would always be a few tables put aside for that," says Frank Jr. Murdocco, who now runs the café with his two brothers, nephew and father. "They brought what they had from Italy to Vancouver and that's where they gathered: that's where they met and that's where they talked." - Vancouver Sun Feb 24, 2016

Fortunato Bruzzese, born and raised in Mammola, Reggio Calabria moved to Vancouver with his young family in 1976. In 1977 he opened La Grotta Del Formaggio, a small Italian Deli filled with incredible products that could make anyone feel like they were standing in a store in Italy. The deli has been situated in the heart of what was once Vancouver's 'Little Italy' and remains there to this day (1791 Commercial Drive).

Tables of Businesses

Commercial Drive 1962

Renzo Tailors	1301 Commercial	Turistano Travel	1565 Commercial
Continental Coffee	1305 Commercial	L'Eco'D Italia News	1565 Commercial
Girardi's Deli	1407 Commercial	Continental Barber	1700 Commercial
Mario's Jewellers	1408 Commercial	Moka Cafe	1706 Commercial
Cantalano Deli	1426 Commercial	Olivieri's Ravioli	1928 Commercial
Italian records	1431 Commercial	Panichelli	2048 Commercial
Farina Market	1472 Commercial		

East Hastings Street 1962

Miloni Importers	2145 E. Hastings	Nina Rose Cafe	2543 E. Hastings
Italian Immigration Assistance Centre	2145 E. Hastings	Girardi's Importers	2565 E. Hastings
Girardi's Travel	2330 E. Hastings	Global Export Import	2643 E. Hastings
Olympia Tailors	2425 E. Hastings	Global Tours Travel	2643 E. Hastings
Capri Barber Shop	2427 E. Hastings	Olympic Barber Shop	2798 E. Hastings
Roma Photo Studio	2439 E. Hastings		



Commercial Drive 1968

Angelo Tailors	1044 Commercial
Cantalano Deli	1144 Commercial
Gondolier Restaurant	1191 Commercial
Fera Heating	1230 Commercial
Continental Coffee	1305 Commercial
Grippo Sales	1311 Commercial
Italian Billiards	1404 Commercial
Moretti's Grocery	1407 Commercial
Mario's Jewellers	1408 Commercial
Italian Records	1409 Commercial
Atlantic Travel	1409 Commercial
Figaro Barber	1418 Commercial
Carmela Beauty	1422 Commercial
Spartano Realty	1426 Commercial
Italian Village Foods	1464 Commercial
Bruno's Italian Goods	1470 Commercial
Farina Market	1472 Commercial
Bunny's Italian Knitwear	1509 Commercial

Gransasso Billiards	1622 Commercial
G&J's Menswear	1519 Commercial
G&J's Florists	1523 Commercial
Cecchetto Furniture	1526 Commercial
Grippo TV	1590 Commercial
Lusitana Grocers	1627 Commercial
Turistano Travel	1665 Commercial
Mira Monte Grocery	1670 Commercial
Fulvia Fashion	1678 Commercial
Columbus Booster Club	1706 Commercial
Moka Restaurant	1728 Commercial
Renato Pastry	1735 Commercial
Gallo Doro Restaurant	1736 Commercial
Falcone Meats	1810 Commercial
Olivieri's Ravioli	1900 Commercial
Olivieri's Travel	1904 Commercial
Roma Meat Market	1918 Commercial
Panichelli	2048 Commercial

East Hastings 1968

Miloni Importers	2145 E. Hastings
Vervaan Insurance	2147 E. Hastings
Pignatelli Music Studio	2300 E. Hastings
Ferraro's Radio & TV	2303 E. Hastings
Girardi's Travel	2330 E. Hastings
Como Market	2340 E. Hastings
Pignatelli Music Studio	2355 E. Hastings
Italian Shoes	2365 E. Hastings
Capri Barber	2389 E. Hastings
Falesca Imports	2411 E. Hastings

Sorrento Barbers	2417 E. Hastings
Olympia Tailors	2425 E. Hastings
Roma Photo Studio	2439 E. Hastings
Venice Coiffures	2447 E. Hastings
Italian Foods	2469 E. Hastings
Angelos Restaurant	2474 E. Hastings
Nino Rose Cafe	2543 E. Hastings
Girardi Importers	2565 E. Hastings
Leonardo's Grocery	2615 E. Hastings
Global Travel	2677 E. Hastings

Commercial Drive 1996

Il' Corso Restaurant	920 Commercial
La Belle Suppy	1025 Commercial
Tony's Market	1046 Commercial
Sortino's Restaurant	1130 Commercial
Fettucini's Espresso	1179 Commercial
Renzo's Tailors	1301 Commercial
San Marco Bakery	1303 Commercial
Pofi Bar	1308 Commercial
Da Vinci Travel	1325 Commercial
Carmelo's Pastry	1399 Commercial
Da Vittoria Restaurant	1414 Commercial
Spartano Realty	1428 Commercial
Il Cafe De Milano	1437 Commercial
Angelo's Tailors	1501 Commercial
Kalena Shoes	1526 Commercial
Arriva Restaurant	1537 Commercial
La Rocca Restaurant	1565 Commercial
Columbus Menswear	1566 Commercial

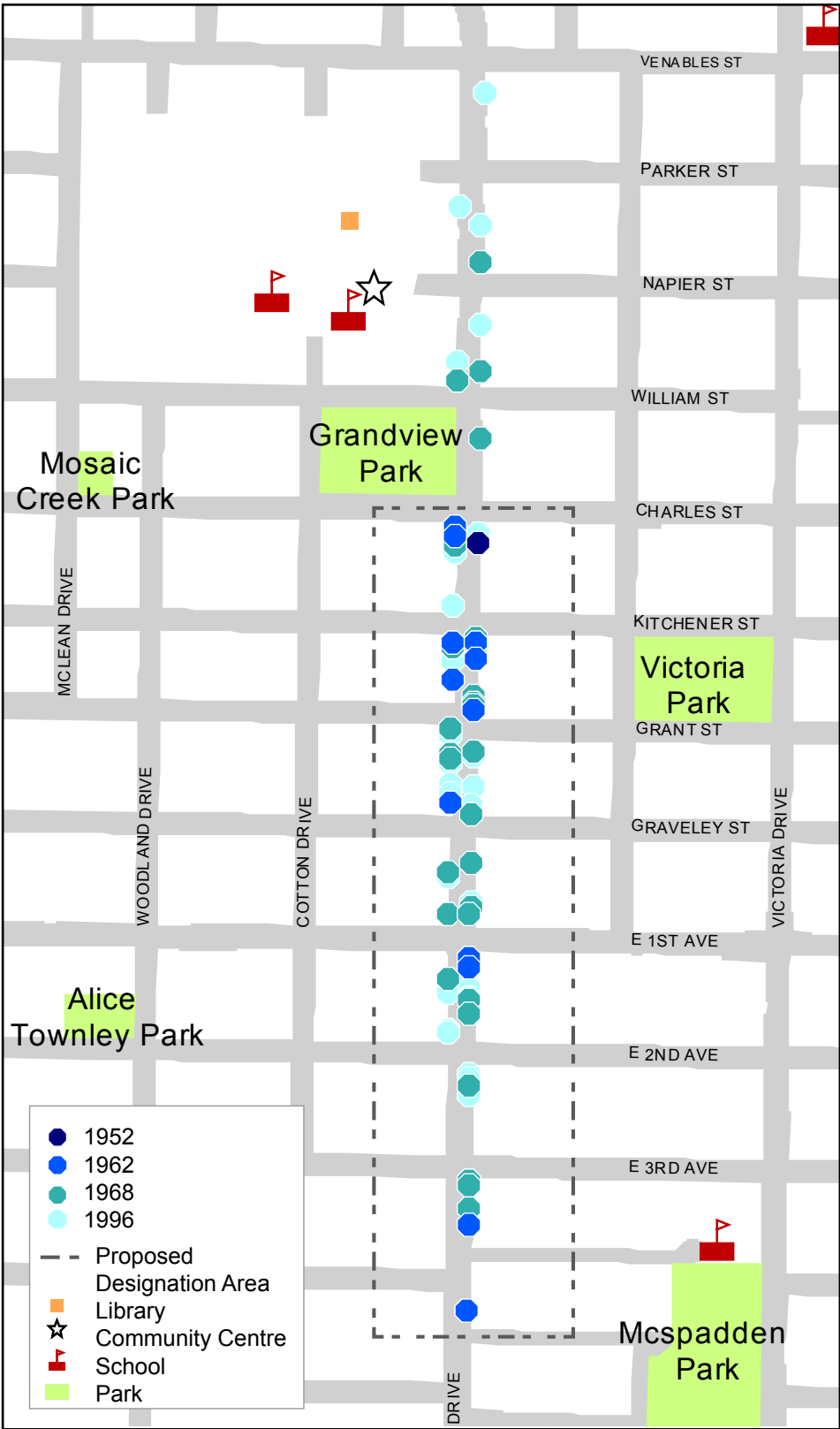
Magnet Hardware	1575 Commercial
Grippo TV	1590 Commercial
Italian Shoe Repair	1641 Commercial
Lombardo's Pizza	1641 Commercial
Cafe Bella Napoli	1670 Commercial
Continental Barber	1700 Commercial
Columbus Travel	1706 Commercial
Milano Furniture	1710 Commercial
Turistano Travel	1733 Commercial
Spumante's Cafe	1736 Commercial
Calabria Coffee Bar	1745 Commercial
Vito's Pastry	1748 Commercial
La Grotto Del Fromage	1791 Commercial
Renalto Pastry	1795 Commercial
Continental Coffee	1806 Commercial
Falcone Bros Market	1810 Commercial
Capelli Hair	1830 Commercial
First Ravioli Store	1900 Commercial

East Hastings Street 1996

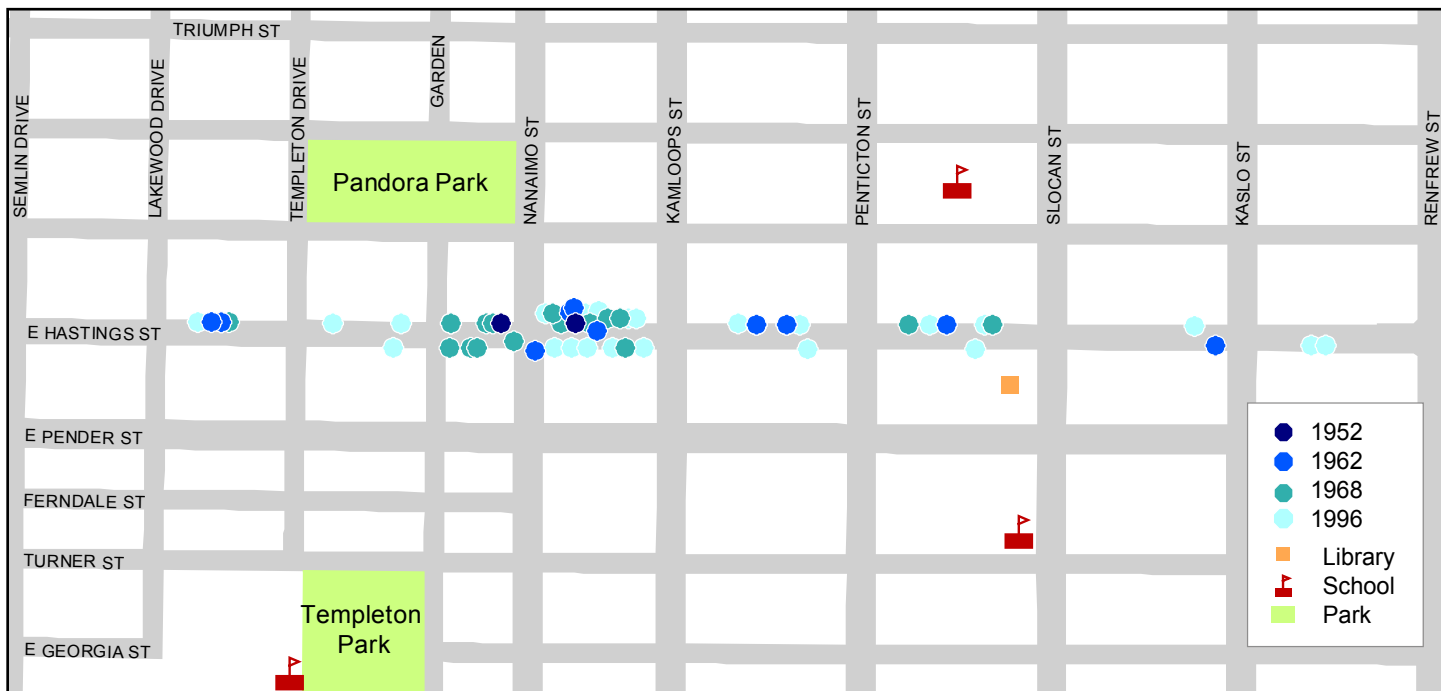
Star Tile	2121 E. Hastings
Tsolia's Taverna	2217 E. Hastings
Columbus Farm Market	2285 E. Hastings
Italian Meat Market	2276 E. Hastings
Incontri Hair Design	2303 E. Hastings
La Rinascente Imports	2401 E. Hastings
Ugo and Joe's	2404 E. Hastings
Sorrento Barbers	2417 E. Hastings
Hastings Dental	2420 E. Hastings
Olympia Tailors	2425 E. Hastings
Como Market	2431 E. Hastings
Polonia Bakery	2436 E. Hastings
Roma Photo	2439 E. Hastings
Carmelina's Houseware	2443 E. Hastings
Astro Travel	2466 E. Hastings

Bianca Maria Foods	2496 E. Hastings
Marco Custom Shoes	2471 E. Hastings
Felicia Restaurant	2492 E. Hastings
Brascia Tailors	2529 E. Hastings
Rocco's Italian Restaurant	2543 E. Hastings
Tevere Imports	2565 E. Hastings
Firenze Jewellers	2575 E. Hastings
Scardillo Grocery	2580 E. Hastings
Photo Franco	2631 E. Hastings
Dr. Salvino	2660 E. Hastings
Remo Coffee Bar	2671 E. Hastings
Girardi's Travel	2677 E. Hastings
Pietro's Italian Restaurant	2783 E. Hastings
Italian Bakery	2828 E. Hastings
Dijo's Pizza Panzerotto	2838 E. Hastings

Italian businesses on Commercial Drive



Italian businesses on East Hastings Street



About the Author

John Atkin is a civic historian and author who has an insatiable curiosity about the history of the city of Vancouver. He has published five books – *Heritage Walks Around Vancouver* (1992), *Strathcona: Vancouver's First Neighbourhood* (1994), *Vancouver Walks* (2004), *Skytrain Explorer* (2005) and *The Changing City* (2011) – as well as numerous articles on heritage issues. John has appeared regularly on television and radio, including for CBC and CTV, was featured in the 1994 Vancouver documentary *Glowing in the Dark*, and curated a Vancouver Museum exhibition titled *City Lights: Neon in Vancouver*.