

Demolition is Forever
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 February 10, 2008
 UCV

In the nearly thirty since I lived in France, I hadn't eaten croissants as good as these. Flaky, buttery, the right size, shape, texture, one bite and it was like being transported back to an unforgettable, formative time in my life. It was a modest set-up called "Café Chez Moi," that opened without fanfare one day in the ground floor of a...let's call it a "character building," on the corner of 4th Avenue and Bayswater Street. We had just started renting in the neighbourhood, and I walked daily to 4th Avenue to catch the buses that bring me here for work and worship.

The building that housed Café Chez Moi was a two story, wooden structure built in 1922, with horizontal plank siding, adorned with a large painted mural of folk musicians, original pressed tin, patterned ceiling in the cafe, and beautiful picture windows that wrapped around the Bayswater and 4th corner. I enjoyed the exchange of greetings and small talk in French with the owner, who was also the cook. It was really tough not making a morning croissant or two a daily habit. For those of you who've been around Vancouver a lot longer than I, this same building had once housed Black Swan Records, renowned for its folk, rock and jazz selection, live music sessions, and its cast of colourful music lovers and record aficionados.

I don't know if even a year had gone by, when one day, Pierre, the café's proprietor, told me that he was being forced to close, and that the building was going to be knocked down to make room for a new apartment and retail building. Within days, metal fencing went up, redevelopment signs were posted; and one-by-one Café Chez Moi, the Nyala Ethiopian Restaurant, and Critters Cottage, a kind of day care centre for dogs and cats, closed down. The bulldozers came and reduced the building to a smoldering, wrecked heap; and then it was just all carted away and the lot scraped bare. In its place—voilà! "Black Swan Apartments," 27 up-scale units, with a Starbucks coffee shop setting up business in the same location where, once-upon-a-time, Black Swan Records and Café Chez Moi offered their distinctive business and breathed a little bit of soul into that intersection of Vancouver. I found it ironic, passing strange, that during the same year that this neighbourhood was celebrating its 100th anniversary, a venerable commercial building that had graced that intersection for over eighty-five years was deemed of so little value, possessed so little protection, fell to the wrecking ball, and was erased from the map.

What makes a building worth loving, preserving, and protecting? Have you experienced living, working or residing near by a building that you value and would hate to see disappear? What would be lost if it was erased from the built landscape in which we live, work, and travel? And if you were to describe it, draw a picture of it, what would it, and the neighbouring space around it, look like? Can you see it in your mind's eye? *(Now, I want all the kids here to draw a picture of a building that they love and care for. You don't have to hurry. You've got some time to work on it. Once you've finished drawing that picture, I want you to turn the paper over and tell me why you love that building and why it shouldn't be knocked down. Do you all have a piece of paper, and something to draw with?)*

I'm asking these questions and have talked about the recent demise of Café Chez Moi in honour of next Monday, February 18th, because it's our official "Canada Heritage Day." Have you heard of it? Thirty-five years ago, the federal government designated the third Monday in February as Canada Heritage Day, in order to "encourage the preservation and promotion of Canada's nationally significant historic, architectural, natural and scenic heritage."

Heritage is our collective treasure, a treasure given to us, a gift, a treasure, if we are wise, that is ours to bequeath to the generations that follow. This nation's heritage is rich, varied and evolving. It includes both the tangible places and landscapes we inhabit, *and* the intangible expressions of the cultures we value—

their stories, symbols, languages, customs and traditions. Heritage is charged with meaning and a spirit that deepens our lives and that connects us together; it honours both our individual dignity and worth and our interdependent connection and destiny. It is an endowment, a gift to treasure, promote, and preserve.

As well, these remarks were prompted by some recent Vancouver heritage catastrophes. I'll just mention two of them; I'm sure you can add any number of your own to the list. The first is the wanton destruction last December of the David Graham House, designed in 1963 by Arthur Erickson; a house once featured on the cover of *Life* magazine. Now I don't consider myself as an "elitist." The building that housed Café Chez Moi in my neighbourhood meant more to me than an Erickson House, if truth be told. And yet, the Graham House was a concrete example of a time when Vancouver led the country in modern architecture, and showed how good design could be inspired and respond thoughtfully to, and not lord over, the unique beauties, textures and light of our natural landscape. *This building*, this sanctuary, designed by our own Wolfgang Gerson, was built almost in the same year as the Graham House; and to this day, it is a visual example of a rich, local, cultural moment; a reminder of how we lived and to what we aspired just two generations ago. Imagine what would be lost, if this sanctuary was reduced to rubble to make room for some bloated, gee whiz, and oh-so-contemporary meeting space!

As well, a feeling of loss comes over me every time now that I go to the UBC campus and walk by what was once called the Main Library; now redubbed a "learning centre." The Main Library, a fine neo-gothic structure built in 1925, used to be a joy for me to work in. It had "age"—muted stone, worn stairs, cramped but open, accessible book stacks, a patina of accumulated human investment; and, wonder of wonders!—it had windows situated next to your study desk, that you could open and shut by your own hand! Sitting in that fine building, toiling away, you could let nature in and regulate your own immediate temperature and environment. Well, all that's gone now. What's left is a portion of the granite façade, and hermetically sealed interior spaces totally dependent on central air and heating. Oh, and did I mention the "automated storage and retrieval system" with its "robotic mini-load crane"? I love libraries and librarians; I mean no disrespect, but the Main Library at UBC has become an automated warehouse; and one building after another, one green space after another on that campus is under assault.

Now you may be wondering aren't these and other buildings placed on a historic site register and protected from desecration; aren't they protected and set aside for the ages by municipal, provincial or federal laws? Haven't we all seen those little triangular signs affixed to structures of historical and cultural significance which places them beyond harm's way? What's going on?

In a nutshell, in the words of Christopher Wiebe of Carlton University, "Canada is the only G-8 nation without laws to protect heritage buildings." And according to the *Globe and Mail's* Trevor Boddy, our provincial and municipal laws and regulations are similarly weak. Private property owners, like those who owned and controlled the Graham House, or the Georgia Street CollierAuto/Fido Showroom, an Art Deco era marvel, knocked down one morning during the civic strike, "needed almost nothing except a perfunctory demolition permit" to level these two buildings, and thus to contribute more "empty-tooth slots in the mug's face" of our "aggressive zombie-towns with no brain and no heart." (see *Wiebe*, "Historic Places Act: Canada Needs a Binding Law!", Heritage Canada, Summer 2006; and *Boddy*, "Vancouver's threatened legacy," *Globe and Mail*, December 29, 2007.).

As Vancouver relentlessly markets itself to global wealth, as its unsentimental real estate market encourages the demolition of heritage houses and buildings to max out lot values and hastily constructs bulimic McMansions, isn't it time to stop and ask: what are we losing with each building leveled, each lot scraped naked and bare? Heritage is an expression of our culture, of what we value, treasure and of what we seek to pass along intact to the future. It can, in the words of Gerda Lerner that I shared with you in the reading before this sermon, it can "give meaning to each life and serve as a necessary anchor for us. It gives us a sense of perspective about our own lives and encourages us to transcend the finite span of our

life-time by identifying with the generations that came before us and...the generations that will follow. By perceiving ourselves to be a part of history, we can begin to think on a scale larger than the here and now. We can expand our reach and with it our aspirations..."

Now I've looked through federal, provincial and municipal heritage and preservation programs, laws, and regulations. The language in each is rich in aspiration, but thin in execution; it is relatively strong, especially on a municipal level, in the "soft strategies" of cajoling owners to preserve our history, but weak on legal guarantees to prevent demolitions and dismemberment.

In one notable example, the federal government embarked on an ambitious, three- phase "Historic Places Initiative" whose aim was to build "a culture of historic conservation"; a commitment to work collaboratively on federal, provincial, territorial, and local levels to achieve "common goals in preservation"; to make accessible effective tools to all Canadians "to protect historic places"; and a commitment by the Canadian government to "become a model custodian of historic places." In three years, the Initiative developed criteria for a new Canadian Register of Historic Places; it initiated pilot projects in preservation; proposed a new Canada Historic Places Act; and, as a result of public consultations, forwarded the recommendation to establish a national trust, financed by the public and private sector, to protect special sites and buildings of traditional, cultural and historic heritage value.

Well, a new government took office two years ago, and among other measures taken to distinguish itself from its predecessor, it defunded, and effectively killed the Historic Places Initiative. And there it languishes, lost between the Department of Canadian Heritage, Parks Canada, and the House of Commons Standing Committee on Canadian Heritage. So many homes! But no roof, no structure, no budget.

(Kids! Students and scholars! How's that picture of a building you love coming along? Have you written down some ideas about why you care for that building and why it shouldn't be knocked down? Now, I want you to draw some things around that building that help to make it beautiful, loved, and protected. It can be people who live and work in it; it can be trees and streets and flowers that help them to be beautiful. Now, will you draw some of those things now around your building? OK. Good.)

For the past week, it has also been my privilege to speak with architects and a member of the City's Planning Office who are dedicated to historic preservation; people who know that demolition is forever, and who are sincere and committed to preserving our heritage and our individual and shared histories embodied in historic buildings and sites. They are articulate and passionate people who care for the common good; people who know that historic places represent the soul and spirit of this city and nation; that their presence in our neighbourhoods and commercial districts make our city a more interesting, attractive place to live; that historical buildings, and their surroundings provide us with tangible economic, environmental, social and cultural benefits.

Vancouver architect Don Luxton spoke to me about the tragedy of the destruction of the Birks Building in 1974 to make room for a new bank tower. But, he talked as well, with well-earned satisfaction, about the hard earned success of the grass roots, seven-year effort to create and preserve the Mole Hill Community Housing Project, with its 27 heritage homes rescued from demolition, its community gardens, park, recycling and HIV/AIDS facility, and its role in the revitalization of that neighbourhood in the West End. In comparison with some jurisdictions he said, we've had some significant successes, and that we're not doing too badly.

Yardley McNeill of the City' Planning Office, lamented the demise of the Fed's Historic Places Initiative, the lack of substantial regulatory powers in the city to prevent demolition of sites of historical and heritage value, and the destruction of the building like the Black Swan on 4th and Bayswater. She also spoke about how in a world that is changing so quickly, we need concrete examples not only of great or representative architecture that connects us to our past, but to ask ourselves seriously: what is the meaning of a city? How

do we construct places and landscapes that express our values, both tangible and intangible, and what steps must we take together to identify, protect, and preserve our treasured historical and heritage resources. She's excited about the fact that for the first time in twenty years, the city is about to embark on a thorough update of the Vancouver Heritage Register; and more, that a three year project, beginning this summer, will be launched in community centres and other places, where residents will be encouraged not only to identify buildings and spaces they feel should be protected and preserved, but to share stories about their ancestors, families and themselves, as they unfolded and took place in relation to places and buildings in this city. The planning office is looking to gather and preserve not only buildings, but also the stories and memories of those who made them come alive and have meaning.

I see conservation, the preservation of buildings, neighbourhoods, and of our constructed landscape, both tangible and intangible, as an example of the humble, necessary art of "mending." I believe in mending—that intentional, quiet practice of taking up needle and thread to darn a sock, to patch a worn pair of Levis or an inner tube on a bike, to shore up a sagging gable on a weathered house, to re-stake a broken down garden fence, to prune an aging tree, to restore, not walk away from a frayed relationship in need of some loving care and attention.

The solace, the satisfaction of mending exceeds the mere rescue of a piece of clothing, a bike tire, a fence, or a relationship. Mending...conservation...preservation goes beyond mere rescue; it enables, it grants time and space and spirit enough for us to stop running around trying to *fix things*. How often do we beat ourselves up and sink in despair for not being able to fix, to solve, to redeem once and or all?

Global warming. Homelessness. Mental illness. Social inequity. Interminable warfare. Name your abiding, numbing, systemic crisis, and your feeling and experience of helplessness before them because they seem beyond solving. Intractable. *I know*, I feel and live with it every day. We may not be able to solve and redeem, but we can mend and conserve things at hand; like a pair of socks, or an aging building in need of an advocate. Saving something that otherwise may have been thrown away, or leveled under the wrecking ball is satisfying; it can even be inspiring. It is a proclamation of hope, the preservation of a story, the sanctification by our hands of a place, an object, a building, a friendship torn by misunderstanding that can yet be mended and rise to new life. (see, Susan Cooke Kittredge, "We All Need Mending," from national Public Radio's series "This I Believe," February 3, 2008.) Alone, perhaps, we cannot solve; but we can mend things at hand—*this*, at least, is given us, and within our power.

(One more time: kids! I want you to look at your picture, sign your name to it, and now, if you can, draw a crown above the building. That's right. And, if you're willing as you leave today, give me your picture. I'll hold on to it, and we can talk about what we should do with them.)

Two thousand years ago, the Roman philosopher Cicero said that not knowing what happened before we were born means being a child forever. For what is human life, unless it is interwoven with the life of our ancestors, by the memory of...history. Recollecting the past provides authority, credibility, resonance and depth to our discourse and to our deeds." May we turn our gaze to the past from time to time to see ourselves as we are and as we would like to be.