The Changing Culture of Detached Homes in Vancouver Post WW2.

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Introduction

A relatively new city, Vancouver has gone through phases of architectural change in the design of homes since the post war era. Through these changes there has been an perceived loss in character and appreciation for the past. At Vancouver Heritage Foundation this is a major concern. Buildings, homes, places with historic significance are being swept away due to rapid densification and modernization. At Vancouver Heritage Foundation preserving historical structures is an important part in recognizing their contribution to the city’s economy, sustainability, and culture. Understanding why Vancouver has a perfers on the ‘new’, newer buildings, modern homes, the latest technology, goes beyond realizing that Vancouver is simply modernizing like any other city in the neoliberal era. Vancouver is distinctively unique, and different factors have led to a loss of value in history which can be is reflected in the built environment.¹

In partnership with the Vancouver Heritage Foundation, this investigation explores Vancouver’s changing culture of detached homes outside of the downtown core. In doing so we hope to understand what has led to changes and shifts in the architecture of homes. Diane Switzer, Executive Director at the Vancouver Heritage Foundation, wanted to begin the investigation with a comparison of immigration and demolition (detached homes) rates in Vancouver to see if there was a correlation, since WWII. The purpose of this was to understand if an increase in demolition rates was connected to immigration. This is important to note because if demolition rates increase as immigration increases then it can be said immigration is an important component in the changing architecture in neighbourhoods Diane and I understood that a factual

correlation could not be made because of various other factors occurring to influence an increase in demolition rates. For example, structural engineering of homes may need to be upgraded fully, which would result in a full demolition of a home. Therefore, in order to see if immigration was playing a role in the changing culture of Vancouver homes we decided to additionally investigate why the culture of homes was changing and what factors led to these changes in an attempt to see if immigrants was influencing these factors.

What follows, will be a two-part investigation. Firstly, comparing immigration and demolition rates since WWII will provide a contextual background that can be used to understand the second portion of the investigation, which is to determine what has caused architectural changes in Vancouver neighborhoods and why. The investigation will look at statistical information provided by the City Vancouver and Statistics Canada. In addition, a literature review will be undertaken to uncover factors leading to the demolition of homes and the lack of renovation and preservation.

**Immigration & Demolition**

Vancouver is a composite ethnic city where there are visible ethnic enclaves and a coalescing of different ethnicities in neighborhoods. The cultural is present in many metropolitan cities in Canada through the vitality with which we [citizens] retain and express our ‘old world’ values and through the music we make together from our rooted identities. Moreover, Vancouver is made up of different ethnic identities, which reflect

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back on the built and social environment of cities. The ethnic composition of Vancouver is built through immigration. Immigration has occurred in waves. As shown in Figure 1, the swells of immigration synchronized with boom periods of city building. Although, the figure represents Montreal, it is similar to Vancouver. Each construction boom has renewed the demand for labor in metropolitan cities, and each wave of immigrant workers has added to the demand for housing.

Figure 1 - Immigration rates and city-building permits, Montreal – Source: Larry Bourne David Ley, *The Changing Social Geography of Canadian Cities* (Montreal, QC: Mcgill-Queen's Univeristy Press, 1998) 65-70

Taking a look at immigration rates is important because it correlates with building permits issued, as seen in Figure 1, and it directly increases the population of Vancouver (minus the out migration), which influences housing in Vancouver because immigrants

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5 Ibid 72
will need residency. To understand this further, Figure 2 shows the immigration rates to Vancouver in decade periods from prior to 1961 to 2001 and sub categorizing them by continent of origin. The figure represents important indications. Firstly, immigration rates

![Figure 2 - Immigration rates to Metropolitan Vancouver – Source: Institute for Research on Public Policy, Immigrants to Metropolitan Vancouver, prod. UBC Library (Vancouver).](image)

into metropolitan Vancouver was 73,200 and the majority of those immigrants came from Europe, in the 60s and 70s. However, the rates of immigration began to increase tremendously in the 80s and 90s, with the dominant immigration group being from Asian. Asian immigration was a new wave establishing in Vancouver and changing its cultural mosaic.

Comparing immigration trends to demolition permit trends was a difficult task to undertake. Firstly, the City of Vancouver does not keep records of its demolition permits historically as a separate category in its records. Instead prior to 2002, the demolition permit records are combined with housing start numbers and renovation permits under
the heading ‘building permits.’ Statistics Canada and the Canadian Home Builders Association also use the combination of permits into the heading ‘building permits’. Secondly, from 2002 to the present records of demolition permits issued are available, however, these numbers include all demolition permits whether it be an apartment building, a garage, or commercial building. Consequently, it is difficult to get an accurate number of demolition permits issued for detached homes. In order to obtain official building permit records, Statistics Canada does offer a custom table of annual and monthly numbers of demolished units by total buildings or by types of dwellings for a cost of $100. This information was not received in time to be included in this paper.

As a result, correlating immigration rates to detached home demolition rates in Vancouver was not possible based on comparable numbers. However, we can ascertain that demolition of detached homes has increased through the course of time in Vancouver. Vancouver being a relatively new city has gone through much infill prior to WWI and after WWII, indicating that new housing was built on open or uninhabited land prior. This means that demolition rates during these eras must have been lower than rates through the 90s up until the present. Therefore, during the 90s most of the city’s neighborhoods and uninhabited land was filled up. Resulting in the demolition of an existing home in order to develop a new one.6

In overview, immigration rates in Vancouver have increased significantly from post WWII to the present. In addition, immigration has shifted to the dominant immigrating group coming from the Asian continent overtaking the European domination in the post WWII periods. Likewise, we can derive that demolition rates of detached homes have increased.

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6 Anonymous informant, interview by Nicholas Dhaliwal. Date March 14th 2013
homes have increased solely based on the facts that Vancouver has developed overtime and in order to build a new home since the WWII, the last major housing development projects in Vancouver, you would need to demolish a pre-existing home. Although, a correlation cannot be made directly between increasing immigration and demolition rates, it can be said that demolition rates have increased because of population expansion and urbanization, which is fundamentally tied to immigration in the case of Vancouver.

**Historical Architectural Design Changes of Detached Homes in Vancouver**

*Pre 1960s Period*

In 1930, the City of Vancouver introduced zoning because it was part of the Bartholomew Plan, which was to bring more unity to residential neighborhoods. The plans provided concentric rings of apartments, dual-family dwellings, and single-family dwellings around a commercial downtown. Most of the city at the time was zoned for single-family dwellings as seen on Figure 3. With zoning it would allow for the prevention of overcrowding, preservation of amenity and protection of property values. Moreover, it would ensure sustainable growth.

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Figure 3 - 1930 Vancouver Family Dwelling Zoning – Source Barbara Ann Pettit, *Zoning and the Single-Family Landscape: Large New Houses and Neighbourhood Change in Vancouver* (Vancouver, BC: The University of British Columbia, 1993) 65

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9 Ibid 74
The 1938 town planning amendment marked the first bylaw change of several regulatory changes, which reduced options for house form and distribution of floor space. Figure 4 shows the 1938 floor space ratio (FSR) bylaw change that made it more practical to build horizontally than vertically (See Appendix A for all zoning changes).

After the zoning principle was introduced, it discouraged many two and half story dwellings because of height restrictions and with the amendment in 1938, it further discouraged multi story homes because the FSR of upper floors would be restricted. As a result, height and FSR restrictions promoted constructions of homes that consumed a lot of open space, as seen in Figure 410.

During the 1940s many builders and home owners wanted to build larger homes instead of being forced to a 1½ story house, to which the bylaw of 1938 limited housing

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construction. Solely based on potential of profit maximization, by converting their homes in the future into apartments or multi family dwellings. After the Second World War the city relaxed the bylaw, and allowed homeowners in single-family zones to build ‘suites to alleviate wartime housing shortages.\footnote{Barbara Ann Pettit, \textit{Zoning and the Single-Family Landscape: Large New Houses and Neighbourhood Change in Vancouver} (Vancouver, BC: The University of British Columbia, 1993) 76.}

The 1950s marked the development of an early form of ‘Vancouver Special’ homes. The City of Vancouver shifted from their relaxed policy into a stricter one adhering the zoning principles set forth in 1930 and 1938. The post-war period brought a halt to the construction of 1½ story houses and introduced styles attuned to new technology and modern preferences\footnote{David Tran, Graduate Student of Architecture at UBC, interview by Nicholas Dhaliwal, March 3rd 2013}. Still, home design was influenced by older traditions and styles influenced by modernists occasionally appeared in residential neighborhoods. Ranch-style houses dominated construction in the 1950s, as seen in Figure 5. Ranch-style housing was built to appeal to young post war families and recent European immigrants because these two groups of people were the only groups in the market for new homes at the time\footnote{Anonymous Informant, interview by Nicholas Dhaliwal, March 14th 2013}. A simple ranch style home suited well with immigrant needs. Basements were used for family members or illegal conversion into a rental unit to help with the mortgage. The new immigrant market facilitated detailed changes to the design of rancher style homes to fit their appetite. In addition, builders began demolishing older smaller homes built before the 1930s, in order to build new homes as uninhabited land became scarce.\footnote{Susanna Langer, \textit{Feeling and Form} (Princeton Hall, 1977) 32.}
Before WWII, Canadian immigration policy discriminated against visible minorities and reflected the conservative bias of the country at the time. However after the war, immigration policy began to change to permit entry on adaptability to Canadian society. These policies removed barriers to Asians in the 1960s\(^\text{15}\). As a result, the post war period brought about significant changes in housing design.

*Post War 1960s – 1980s*

By the 1960s, the city moved further away from land use patterns that shaped Vancouver’s residential neighborhoods before zoning was introduced. With the increasing use of automobiles and the desire by all levels of government to extend single-family ownership as widely as possible, the city promoted a less compact use of land. Builders began to try to replicate aspects of the pre 1930 zoning pattern in single-family areas. This meant, with response to specific market demands, Vancouver’s eastside builders began to build larger homes with floor plans that could easily be converted into two family uses. Although early Vancouver Specials were similar in size to houses built

before zoning, their structural design was different, as seen in Figure 5. Vancouver Specials shifted the design of homes into a new direction. Vancouver Specials were mass-produced and sacrificed quality for speed of construction. Builders and realtors argued that lower land costs in East Vancouver contributed to the design of the special\textsuperscript{16}. Cheaper land prices allowed builders to build large homes with inexpensive materials and minimal details for new immigrants who wanted space at low cost. Specials began to spread through the east side of Vancouver from the mid 1960s through to the 1970s. During this period, neighborhoods began to take a new pattern of design and feel. This new pattern was distinctively different from what neighborhoods were traditionally. The new design differed from the older homes by leaving less space for greenery and catering to a European immigrant demographic and the wave of Asian immigration coming into the city in the 1970s.\textsuperscript{17} Figure 5 and 7 show what the new design of homes tended to look like during this period. \textsuperscript{18} Italian immigrants were championed with shaping the Vancouver Special into Figure 6 because they preferred the upstairs to be formal and to live and cook downstairs. \textsuperscript{18} This pattern of Vancouver special continued into the 1980s\textsuperscript{19}.

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\item Confidentia, interview by Nicholas Dhaliwal, \textit{Changing culture of Vancouver Homes}, (March 2013).
\item David Tran.
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In 1974, the City of Vancouver introduced an amendment to the zoning laws which increased floor space from 45% (established in 1956) to 60% FSR (refer to appendix for image), as seen in Figure 8. Basements were not included in the FSR. Therefore, it restricted the size of homes, but at the same time encouraged all builders in the city to
build to maximums stipulated to satisfy a market now used to buying larger homes.\textsuperscript{20} Around the same time in 1978, Canada instituted a New Immigration Act, in which, it instituted a points system immigration policy. Consequently, the government gave top priority to family-class, wealthy, and educated immigrants. Coupled with investment into the real estate market by Hong Kong billionaire Li Ka Shing, in the late 1980s, signaled to Asians that Vancouver was a safe place to invest your money and become entrepreneurial. These factors combined to increase the flow of wealthy Asian immigrants to Vancouver in particular due to proximity with the Pacific Rim and an established Asian community already in the city.\textsuperscript{21} Recall that in figure 1, you can see in the 1970s, and 80s there was a dramatic increase in percentage of Asian immigrants entering metropolitan Vancouver.

1980s Onwards

The increase of affluent Asian immigration led to another phase of neighborhood change. In the 1980s, Asian tastes called for more space above grade, which paved the way for a new kind of large home. These homes were called Monster Homes because of

\textsuperscript{20} David Tran, interview by Nicholas Dhaliwal, \textit{Information on Zoning Changes}, (March 2013).
their large size and contrasting design to Vancouver Specials and older traditional homes on the west side of Vancouver, as seen in Figure 9. This design is what affluent Asian immigrants preferred, thus, monster homes began to regularly appear on the west side of Vancouver. Affluent immigrants were able to buy in to the west side because they had the finances to do so and desired to live in prestigious neighborhoods in Vancouver.\footnote{Wei Le, \textit{Ethnoburb: the new ethnic community in urban America} (University of Hawaii Press, 2009) 1-17}

The houses were more expensively detailed than the Vancouver Specials, but similarly, they maximized zoning and generally had an extra suite to accommodate the larger Asian families or guests. In order to tame the Monster Home, the City of Vancouver changed its single family zoning because of complaints by residents on the
‘monstrous’ nature of the design and the preservation of neighborhoods\textsuperscript{23}. These changes aimed to deal with the suite issue by legalizing suites across the city and permitted legal rental suites, which the majority of city residents favored. In 1988, the city decreased the height and increased the setbacks and decreased the above grade floor space. This resulted in the disappearance of the Vancouver Special and the emergence of a new popular style across the city\textsuperscript{24}, as seen in Figure 10.

![Vancouver Special vs. Present Housing Style](http://www.vancouverspecial.com/?690) and ![Vancouver Special vs. Present Housing Style](http://2.bp.blogspot.com/_TfPXQmO8ZvE/TJygsvOZd5I/AAAAAAAAACo/wmvMiUruG1o/s1600/Ranch.jpg).

Figure 10 - Vancouver Special vs. Present Housing Style – Sources: http://www.vancouverspecial.com/?690 and http://2.bp.blogspot.com/_TfPXQmO8ZvE/TJygsvOZd5I/AAAAAAAAACo/wmvMiUruG1o/s1600/Ranch.jpg.

The link between size of home and prosperity of purchases was not obvious before the 1980s because earlier immigrants could afford only cheaply built large Vancouver Specials. However, in the 1980s the link became obvious, as immigrants themselves were different. Some Asian immigrants could afford more modestly priced eastside homes on arrival, while others were wealthy enough to buy expensive west homes. Builders, who built for each dominant immigrant group waves since the 1950s,

\textsuperscript{23} Avi Friedman, \textit{Room for Thought} (Toronto: Penguin Canada) Chapter 2.

started to demolish smaller homes on large west side lots to meet demands by these new affluent Asian immigrants and their taste for large expensive homes.\textsuperscript{25}

Throughout 1989 the neighborhood changes intensified and as land was sparse demolition of smaller homes took place to make room for newer bigger homes. Consequently, the need for affordable housing became a heated issue as the city wide development of newer homes often priced many local born residents (baby boomers children) out of the market and into the suburbs\textsuperscript{26}.

Two fundamental changes occurred over time in Vancouver. First, established neighborhoods districts within the single-family zones in the city began to age, which facilitated the older residents to move out of these traditional neighborhoods and into the suburbs. Secondly, forces outside the single-family zones also exerted pressure for changes. The forces of urbanization brought people from rural areas to the city. Additionally, waves of European immigrants followed the first settlers and included many who initially could not afford to purchase detached homes but were able to accumulate enough wealth to buy housing of their choice.\textsuperscript{27} This sparked the first phase of architectural change with the onset of the Vancouver special. The affluent Asian immigration led the second change into the monster homes and the newer dominant style of housing seen in Figure 8. Both changes were based on pressures from the city to conform to the wants of the public and to provide sound planning initiatives and because of immigrant preferences in the housing market which led to builders developing homes that pushed the envelope of zoning principles.

\textsuperscript{26} Wei Le, Ethnoburb: the new ethnic community in urban America (University of Hawaii Press, 2009).
\textsuperscript{27} Barbara Ann Pettit, Zoning and the Single-Family Landscape: Large New Houses and Neighbourhood Change in Vancouver (Vancouver, BC: The University of British Columbia, 1993). P6
Conclusion

In summary, changes in Vancouver’s architecture of detached homes have been a confluence of factors. The obvious factors include changes in zoning that have occurred since the 1930s, which allowed builders to design homes to new specifications. Zoning and subsequent amendments to policy effectively changed the allowable size of homes, which dictated style as alluded to earlier. In addition, it is clear to see that immigrants entering Vancouver played a role in the design of design of homes. The the wave of European immigrants wanted cheaper, quickly built homes while the wave of affluent Asian immigration preferred a larger traditional (Asian) design of home and maximization of lot size\textsuperscript{28}. Zoning and Immigration are two fundamental factors influencing home design in Vancouver, however, the discussion can be taken further with some non-visible factors relating to zoning and immigration. We know zoning policy changes led to the ability to create homes of different sizes, but to understand why policy changes occurred needs exploration. What motivates a city to undertake zoning policy changes? It can be said that sustainable growth and reaction to public outcry are main sources for change, but I believe it is necessary to look at city planning as a whole to completely understand why zoning changes occurred. Understanding the long-term vision for Vancouver at the time of policy changes will give insight on why specific changes were made without the influence of immigration of public outcry.

Additionally, immigration is a visible factor contributing to changes in housing design, however it is important to note the motivations for immigrants to seek formal housing in Vancouver and the type of the housing they choose. Immigrants entering a

new country seek belonging by entering into a Canadian neighborhood where they want to be able to grow their roots. These choices are imperative to understanding changes in design because immigrants will likely want homes that they are accustomed to in respect to design. It makes them feel more comfortable in a new society.\textsuperscript{29} At the same, affluent immigrants driving up prices of homes and making Vancouver a hot bed for real estate investment comes with negative impacts. Offshore investors are often purchasing and developing homes in the Vancouver market to gain profit. As a result, change is not coming from within neighborhoods or by new immigrants, but by offshore investors who do not need to be citizens or immigrants to Vancouver to influence changes in housing design in neighborhoods.\textsuperscript{30} Furthermore, local developers also influence the changing design structure. In the early 70s, Vancouver Specials were so easy to make that you only needed two or three men to build them. This ease of construction made it an attractive home to construct and easy to inspect by the city because all houses relatively took the same shape\textsuperscript{31}. As a result, immigrant builders became developers because building a Vancouver Special became a universal language, which led to the spread of them across the city. Similarly, this happened with the new style of home that has been seen through the 90s up until the present. In addition, if individuals saw these new homes being built around the city and attached the connotation of family prosperity to them, this would have facilitated other individuals wanting to own a home of that design because it became of a symbol of making it, especially for new immigrants.\textsuperscript{32} 

\textsuperscript{31} Confidential, interview by Nicholas Dhaliwal, , Changing culture of Vancouver Homes, (March 2013).
\textsuperscript{32} Avi Friedman, Room for Thought (Toronto: Penguin Canada).
Lastly, renovation rather than demolition in Vancouver hasn’t been popular in all neighborhoods. This is in part, because Vancouver Specials were built with cheap materials, which led to demolition in order to meet with modern structural and building code standards. In addition, affluent Asian immigrants could afford to demolish a home and build a home of their own liking because they had the financial flexibility to do so. As well, the City makes more tax revenue off the construction of a new home than issuing a renovation permit. It is important to note that these types of homes and waves of immigrants did not affect the city uniformly. Instead Vancouver is built of many unique communities like Kitsilano, Commercial Drive, Mount Pleasant, which were not as widely affected by waves of immigration and changes in zoning policy. These neighborhoods tended to fight off gentrification and have preserved historical significance and culture in a modern way. Understanding why neighborhoods were able to do this is a source for further investigation.

33 David Tran, interview by Nicholas Dhaliwal, Information on Zoning Changes, (March 2013).
34 Confidential, interview by Nicholas Dhaliwal, Changing culture of Vancouver Homes, (March 2013).
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