Uncovering the Significance of the Bowser Block
And Historical Geography of Kerrisdale

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ABSTRACT

Established with the arrival of the Canadian Pacific Railway (CPR) station in 1902, the Kerrisdale Neighbourhood has grown to be an important part of Vancouver’s Identity. The neighbourhood started and expanded around its iconic commercial core. The Bowser Block was built in 1912 at the centre of this commercial core. This Edwardian suburban style commercial development is one of the final, original buildings remaining. The Bowser Block was built in a time of prosperity and growth. Its construction anchored the neighbourhood in its present day geographic location. In this research, I attempt to understand the development of the neighbourhood and recognize the forgotten historical figures associated with its development. My goal is to uncover the historical facts and associations the Bowser Block may have as to establish its heritage value, with the aim of adding it onto the Vancouver Heritage Register.
UNCOVERING THE SIGNIFICANCE OF THE BOWSER BLOCK AND HISTORICAL GEOGRAPHY OF KERRISDALE

Human culture is not preserved through historical facts and events. Human culture is preserved through the connection felt towards historical facts and events. The degree of connection dictates the significance and therefore its preservation. For the purpose of this research, the focus has been on the Bowser Block and it’s “association with ways of life that have significant impact on the city’s past”.\(^1\) After preliminary research based on archival documentation of conversations, memories, and photographs as well as secondary source information from time period and location specific books and municipal reports, the Bowser Block is an undeniably significant “anchor” building that has shaped the community of Kerrisdale.\(^2\) With the inclusion of the preliminary evaluation completed by the Planning and Development Services of the City of Vancouver, the Bowser Block’s association with significant individuals, historical context, and architectural form makes it a viable candidate to be nominated for a place on the Vancouver Heritage Register as an A-Listing site. This research has been done in partnership of the Vancouver Heritage Foundation, specifically to establish a framework for a potential Statement of Significance for the Bowser Block.

Definition of Significance

The criteria of significance changes and varies through time and depending on geography. Originally known as the Vancouver Heritage Inventory from 1986, the Vancouver Heritage Register was adopted by the Vancouver City Council in December 1994. As of June 11\(^{th}\) 2014, 2,200, excluding municipally designated sites in Chinatown and Gastown, were listed on the Vancouver Heritage Register. These sites are separated into three categories: A-listing sites - *Primary Significance* - which represent the best examples of a style or type of building and may also be associated with a person or event of significance; B-listing sites - *Significance* – which represent good examples of a particular style of type and may have some documented historical or cultural significance; C-listing


\(^2\) Planning and Development Services (2015), Historical Association portion of the Evaluation, 1.
sites – *Contextual or Character* – which represent buildings that contribute to the historic character of an area or streetscape.³ Although significance is defined differently depending on perspective, the Vancouver Heritage Register represents a collective municipal perspective recognizing significance based on the impact and influences a site have on the development of either an individual neighbourhood or the city as a whole. There has been research on the disappearance of residential dwellings and critiques of the usefulness of the Vancouver Heritage Register;⁴ stating that recognition of heritage status is useless without heritage designation, which is the “legal means of heritage protect”.⁵ The purpose of this essay is not to critique the degree of protection, if any, associated with heritage status, but to expand public awareness of significant sites, specifically the Bowser Block, and place them on the path towards heritage status and potentially, heritage designation.

**The Significance of the Bowser Block**

![Image of Bowser Block](image-url)

Figure 1. Bowser Block, West 41ˢᵗ and West Boulevard, Kerrisdale: 1913, Unknown photographer, VPL Accession 71339.

³ City of Vancouver (2014), 1.
⁴ Hahn, Michelle (2014), “A Close Study on the Relationship Between the Historical Geography and Kerrisdale Architectural Styles,” University of British Columbia, 3. *This paper was written by an undergraduate student as a former class project in the same course (GEOG 429 with Dr. David Brownstein). Available on UBC cIRcle at http://hdl.handle.net.ezproxy.library.ubc.ca/2429/48371*
⁵ City of Vancouver (2014), 4.
The neighbourhood of Kerrisdale was established in 1902 with the opening of the “Sockeye Express,” which was a Canadian Pacific Railway (CPR) line that ran from the City of Vancouver, present day Gastown, to service the canneries in Steveston. Three years after its opening, the line was leased off to the BC Electric Railway Company and became electrified. With stations in mainly undeveloped areas and travelling at 90 km/hr every hour, this interurban line allowed for middle-class residents to own properties and build homes further from city cores at cheaper prices, while still having access to the City of Vancouver. The neighbourhood of Kerrisdale was named after the family home in Scotland of Mrs. MacKinnon, who was a pioneer resident of the area.

Originally, the neighbourhood of Kerrisdale was a part of the Municipality of South Vancouver. The new neighbourhood had a smaller, yet growing population. To regain control of the use of their taxes and disconnect themselves from the “penny-pinching policy of civic improvements” of the Municipality of South Vancouver, the residents of Kerrisdale requested separation and subsequently the incorporation of the Municipality of Point Grey. In 1908, the middle-class residents achieved separation. With direct access to the Steveston canaries and the City of Vancouver as well as the authority to control the development of their young municipality, Point Grey was in a period of prosperity.

Figure 2. Point Grey Municipality, View of Kerrisdale (Municipal Hall on Left): 1911, City of Vancouver Archives, Photographer Dodge, H.O., Major Matthews Collection AM54-S4-: PAN P51.

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Built in 1912, the Bowser Block was a prominent, commercial “anchor” building in Kerrisdale on the corner of West Boulevard and Wilson Road, present day W 41st Ave.\textsuperscript{9} Although not the first, it is recognized as the “first substantial commercial building”\textsuperscript{10} in Kerrisdale. The first resident to take advantage of the growing community and establish the commercial core on the corner of West Boulevard and W 41st Ave., across from the location of the Bowser Block, was Mr. Syd Bell.\textsuperscript{11} Visible in Figure 2, Mr. Bell’s building held a grocery and post office. The Bowser Block, only visible as a clear cut lot in the panorama view of Kerrisdale (fig. 2) in 1911, holds an even larger responsibility to the community to preserve the origins of the commercial core as older commercial buildings, such as Mr.Bell’s, have been lost. A good example of Edwardian suburban commercial development, the Bowser Block also represents an early example of mixed use development.\textsuperscript{12} As visible in Figure 3 which depicts a rear-facing view, the second storey of the Bowser Block was designed for residential use; where the front, as visible in figure 1, has been designed to have easy access to the street for commercial use. Since its establishment, the Bowser Block has always had a bank as a resident. Originally the Bank of

\begin{footnotes}
\item[10] Kluckner, Michael (1984), 164.
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British North America, the Bank of Montreal took over in 1935 and still remains there today.  

The Bowser Block was built by Francis Bowser and Francis Burd. Both these men were prominent figures in the political, social, and physical developments which created the foundation for present day Vancouver.

Francis Bowser, as pictured on the left, was born on September 13, 1858 in Kingston, present day Rexton, New Brunswick. He was known as a “Trail Blazer of Point Grey”. From 1910 – 1911, he was the second reeve, or mayor, of the Point Grey Municipality; during a time of prosperity and financial stability. Three pieces of infrastructures and institutions can be attributed to this man. Firstly is the Kerrisdale School, which is currently classified as an A-listing on the Vancouver Heritage Register. Opened in 1908, this institution faced the risk of not meeting municipal requirements for educational buildings, which required at least 12 students. Francis Bowser convinced General Duff-Stuart to lend him two students from his camp that he ran on Magee Road, present day W 49th Ave. He also used his family connections through his wife’s niece in Victoria, to obtain another potential student. With the establishment of the first school in Point Grey at W 41st Ave. and Carnarvon St., Bowser created another vital amenity that sustained and solidified the foundation of the community. Secondly, Francis Bowser was instrumental in the creation of

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15 Zion Lodge No. 77 of Kerrisdale (2014), “Centenary Celebration: Banquet Program,” Ancient Free and Accepted Masons of British Columbia and Yukon, 14.
16 City of Vancouver (2014), 15.
17 Kluckner, Michael (1984), 164.
the Kerrisdale Masonic Hall, Zion Lodge No. 77 of the Ancient Free and Accepted Masons of British Columbia and Yukon. Recognized as the “Father of Zion Lodge,” Francis Bowser held meetings at his own home, led the members of the Zion Lodge during a time of transition, and worked without hesitation to have the Zion Lodge constituted. The Kerrisdale Masonic Hall, currently located at 2142 W 41st Ave and neighbour to the Bowser Block, has also been official recognized by the Vancouver Heritage Register in the B-Listing category. Finally, Bowser is also praised with the original grading of the North Arm Road, present day Granville South, as far as Magee Road, present day 49th Ave. As Reeve, Bowser fulfilled the purpose of the separation from the Municipality of South Vancouver with the investment in local infrastructure and amenities. Although this is not a complete list, these are just a few of the major impacts Francis Bowser had on the neighbourhood of Kerrisdale.

Figure 5. Major Matthews Collection, “The Honourable William J. Bowser,” 1915, Photographer Wadds, George T., Vancouver, City of Vancouver Archives AM54-S4: Port P1066.

Although not directly associated with the building of the Bowser Block, but considering they still bare the same name, it is important to mention the role of William Bowser; younger brother of Francis Bowser. Pictured on the right, Hon. William Bowser was a managing partner of the law firm Bowser, Reid, and Walbridge as well as the BC Attorney General from 1907 to 1915. He succeeded Richard McBride as the 17th BC Premier in 1916. William Bowser was also a commissioner of the fisheries. By implementing stricter regulations on salmon fishers and shortening the fishing seasons,

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18 Zion Lodge (2014), 22.  
19 Zion Lodge (2014), 16.  
local surviving salmon populations can be attributed to Bower's actions. Documented as significant to residents of the neighbourhood, both William Bowser and Francis Bowser had a hand to plan in keeping Shaughnessy Heights from separating as requested by the CPR. Daughter of Fitzgerald McCleery, Miss Margaret Elizabeth McCleery recollects the trip she took with her father as child to Victoria to convince Premier Richard McBride that separation of the land would be unfavourable. Even though the residents would be paying a higher property tax, they wanted to remain a part of the decision making in regards to that property. In a conversation recorded by Major Matthews, Mr. Ker also explains how the Bowser Brothers argued that the separation would be impossible due to the extensive and complex plans for sewage and drainage as well as roads and sidewalks that were integrated into and between Kerrisdale and Shaughnessy Heights; and separation simply “could not be done”. They were successful in avoiding the separation and upholding their Municipality’s demands.

Figure 6. “Honorary Degree Recipients J.A. Pearce, F.J. Burd and R.W. Mayhew,” (Cropped) May 16,1955, Photographer unknown, University of British Columbia Library, UBC Historical Photograph Collection. UBC 1.1/4463.

Finally, the other man to whom we can attribute the Bowser Block’s creation is Francis Burd, pictured on the left. Although this man held no political position in government, he was not without influence. A journalist by trade, Francis Burd was an active citizen and well respected man. He was recognized as “Canadian journalism’s most durable

25 Reference Major Matthews Early Vancouver Collection. Vol. 4, 259 (See note 25)
veteran.” Working his way up through the Vancouver Daily Province LTD, present day The Province, he eventually led the newspaper as President. As President and in collaboration with Fred Southam, he directly aided in the construction of Victory Square and the Cenotaph, which sat directly in front of their original building that held the newspaper; an eleven thousand dollar investment and a well known landmark on the corner of Cambie St. and W Hastings St. Burd was in many ways a socialite, who took interest in a variety of fields. His involvement included: the Board of Governors for the Vancouver General Hospital, Director of the Cancer Institute, and the Executive of the Welfare Association. In 1938, he received the “Good Citizen of Vancouver” Award for his continuous community involvement and association with charitable organizations, such as the Masonic Order to the Victorian Order of Nurses. Francis Burd also received an Honorary Doctor of Laws Degree from the University of British Columbia in 1955. Aside from the impressive resume of experience, Francis was known as a cheerfully man, "a great fellow and one whose deeds will be of lasting benefit in this and other communities.”

Undeniably, these men (Francis Bowser, William Bowser, and Francis Burd) led impressive careers and held influence over city development during their time. This can be confirmed with their achievement of the title of Grand Mason at Zion Lodge in Kerrisdale; William Bowser from 1904 – 1905; Francis Bowser from 1907 – 1908; Francis Burd from 1911 – 1912. Although historically the organization is known for its secrecy, titles are achieved by recognizable charitable work and members “who cherish the highest

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30 See Reference to UBC Honorary Degree Citations 1955- 1958.
31 Zion Lodge (2014), 10-11.
standards of morality and ethics in their dealings with each other and with society at large.”

All three men were leaders. Men, who took action and shaped the neighbourhood, city, and province around them, forming the urban geography of the region closer to what is recognizable today.

**Present Day Evaluation**

For the purpose of comparison and contrast, it should be noted that there are several buildings in the neighbourhood of Kerrisdale or associated with pioneer residents of Kerrisdale, which are already on the Vancouver Heritage Register. The Francs Bowser House is rated as an A-listing site on the Heritage Register. This high appraisal is partially due to its association with Frank Bowser, who is considered of “moderate importance to [the] city”. Located at 1164 Comox St. in the West End of Downtown Vancouver, the architectural significance is found in the fact that the house is situated in the middle of a full lot and is a very good example of Queen Anne style architecture. Although this house is in another neighbourhood of the city, it presents a good comparison for the Bowser Block. As the historical association of the Francis Bowser House represents only one of two, arguably three, men associated with the Bowser Block. Furthermore, the Bowser Block has also been evaluated and recognized as architecturally significant as a “very good example of Edwardian suburban commercial development”. The physical integrity of the house is of a lower standard than that of the Francis Bowser House, as components such as the original storefronts and original windows have been lost. As this has already been noted in the preliminary evaluation, if the corresponding score for historical association awarded to the Francis Bowser House were used as precedence for

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the Bowser Block, the total score would be in the range of an A-Listing site representing Primary Significance. Furthermore, extensive research on commercial tenants such as the Avenue Grill may also aid in the total heritage value applicable to the Bowser Block.

**Conclusion**

Today, I believe the Bowser Block is a valid candidate for the A-Listing: Primary Significance category on the Vancouver Heritage Register. The building itself has gone under minor reconstruction and still successfully serves the same function it was built for over a century ago. The preliminary evaluation completed by the Planning and Development Service of the City of Vancouver has already established a foundation for the application of heritage status.

I believe the Bowser Block to be pivotal in the geographic lay out of the Kerrisdale Neighbourhood. It is one of the last remaining, original buildings from the beginning of the birth of both the neighbourhood of Kerrisdale and the previous Municipality of Point Grey. Establishing and holding down the location of the commercial centre, the structure also presented a foreshadowing of the mixed use developments that are common in Vancouver today. The Bowser Block is also associated with three leaders. Men who took action and shaped the neighbourhood, city, and province around them; forming the urban geography closer into what we know it as today. I believe the Bowser Block, at the honourable age of 104, deserves to be preserved and recognized as a site of primary significance on the Vancouver Heritage Register.
Works Cited

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