ABSTRACT: Stanley Park, Vancouver's 1001-acre crowning glory, has been in continual dialectical relationship with the citizens that populate the city located right outside its boundaries. Through oral history interviews and story submissions from former residents of Vancouver's West End neighbourhood, I explore how what was a familial, close-knit neighbourhood during the 1940s and 1950s came under drastic changes in the latter half of the century. Rapid development of apartment buildings led to an increase in park users. I argue that with an increased population accessing the park, planning decisions for Stanley Park need to mediate between widely varied ideas about how to properly manage nature.
INTRODUCTION

World-renowned for its expansiveness, natural beauty, and ample amenities, Stanley Park is an iconic feature of the city of Vancouver. However, Stanley Park is not just a natural expanse of forest; it is a space that is both personal and political, with a history characterized by an increasing number of invested park users with competing ideas about the park's purpose.

Stanley Park grew up alongside the city, as the newly formed City Council decided at their first meeting in 1886, to petition the federal government to set aside the 1,001 acre peninsula as a park instead of a military reserve.¹ In 1888, Stanley Park was officially opened, and Mayor David Oppenheimer declared it to be for visitors to “spend some time amid the beauties of nature away from the busy haunts of men”.² However, this simplistic notion of a park space would soon prove to be problematic, as Stanley Park became increasingly utilized and conflicting ideologies over how the park should be best managed arose.³ In this historical account, I examine how the interaction of the city with the Stanley Park was affected by rapid changes in the character of Vancouver’s West End neighbourhood in the mid-century. By weaving oral history interviews and anecdotes together from a group of people who spent their childhoods in the West End, I animate a narrative of neighbourhood change, and illustrate the unique importance of this vast park to the kids who grew up beside it. I also examine how an increasing number of users in Stanley Park over the last half of the 20th century affected planning decisions, specifically in relation to the impassioned conflict between pedestrians and bicyclists over access to the

seawall. Together, these historical narratives exemplify the way that personal experience and connection with a physical space has become so tightly wound up in the heavily politicized debates in decisions around planning in Stanley Park.

BEFORE THE HOUSING BOOM: THE WEST END IN THE 1940s and 50s

All of the former West Enders I interviewed remembered their childhood in the West End fondly, enthusiastically explaining how their little corner of the world was an absolutely wonderful place to grow up. The West End in the 1940s and 50s was an affordable primarily family-oriented area, and the children who grew up there seemed to have a sense of freedom in the neighbourhood that does not exist to the same extent today.

At the beginning of the century, the West End had been home to some of Vancouver’s wealthiest elite, living in grand detached Victorian houses. However, this began to change as the central business district expanded into the West End, and as single-family houses began to be converted into multi-occupancy suites and rooming houses. Wealthier families began to depart to other, more fashionable neighbourhoods such as Shaughnessy and West Vancouver after the Lions Gate Bridge was completed in 1938. The depression and WWII further invoked a distinct transformation in the character of the neighbourhood from a wealthy, exclusive area of single-family homes to one with more mid- to lower-class

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5 P. Roy, Vancouver: An Illustrated History, 137; G. Gray, Patterns of Neighbourhood Change, 28
families living in subdivided houses and low-rise apartment blocks (see Figure 1).  

(Figure 1) An aerial view of the West End in 1957, right before the construction boom. There were still some old detached homes, interspersed between a growing number of low-rise apartment buildings. The Sylvia Hotel, located on the left of the photo, was the tallest building in the area at 8 storeys. Photo by Chas. S. Jones, Vancouver Daily Province. City of Vancouver Archives, Major Matthews Fonds. Collected photographs. Ref. code AM54-S4-: Dist P133.

Bryan Cousineau, a former West Ender, remembers the West End of his childhood as a “real neighbourhood,” in which kids could wander all over the area, only returning home at the resounding clang of the 9 o’clock gun sounding from Brockton Point in Stanley Park.

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6 P. Roy, Vancouver: An Illustrated History, 143.
7 B. Cousineau, interview by author. Tape recording, Richmond, BC, 5 March, 2016.
FREEDOM TO ROAM: MEMORIES OF STANLEY PARK DURING THE MID-CENTURY

For children and teens growing up in the West End in the mid-century, Stanley Park was an extension of the territory they would roam; in essence, it was their backyard. Roberta Forster Sheppard, who spent her childhood in the West End and graduated from King George High School in 1955, said, “looking back I now realize that probably the best gift of those early days was the freedom we had as youngsters exploring and enjoying the whole area on our own after school.”8 For each of the people I interviewed, the park had a different meaning, with different memories attached to their experience, but all were in agreement that Stanley Park played a uniquely important role in their childhood. Born in the West End in 1933, 5-year-old entrepreneur Herb Nolan walked down to Stanley Park with his little red wagon, collecting cans and bottles from the beaches to return and could cobble together enough coins to buy himself an ice cream. Herb gleefully described how jealous his friends were of his spending money, especially at a time when most people did not have much to spare.9 In the early 1950s, before 1962’s Hurricane Freda felled large swathes of trees, Kent Pearson hiked and played with his friends in what was then a denser forest.10 Living in the West End for her whole life, Maggie Tidswell was passionate about encountering nature in Stanley Park as a child, and still visits the park regularly at present day. As a child, she spent afternoons on the beaches, exploring the tide pools with the starfish and sea urchins.11 For others, the park was a place where they learned and grew. Like many other West End kids of the 1950s, Roberta Forster Sheppard and Carol Ramseth

8 R. Forster Sheppard, e-mail message to author, 7 March, 2016.
10 K. Pearson, e-mail message to author, 24 February, 2016.
remember taking swimming lessons in the park, either at Second Beach or the former pool at Lumberman’s Arch.\textsuperscript{12} Ron Wasko, who has lived in the West End for all of his 62 years, found a different sort of freedom in the park’s trails through several wild teenage nights spent drinking and carousing with friends under the cover of nightfall.\textsuperscript{13} Recreational opportunities in the park also extended to skating on Lost Lagoon, and many children and teenagers would take advantage of the rare occasion when it would freeze over.\textsuperscript{14} For Gary Pennington, who was born in the West End in the late 1930s, Stanley Park was so enticing that in grade four when he was supposed to be on bed rest to recover from what the doctors believed was tuberculosis, he would sneak out to explore the vast expanse of the park.\textsuperscript{15} For a generation of West End children, Stanley Park was theirs to freely reign over, a backyard park rather than a bustling regional attraction.

**1957-PRESENT: THE WEST END CONSTRUCTION BOOM**

During the 1940s and early 1950s, the West End remained a neighbourhood characterized by families living in suites in older homes or low-rise apartment buildings, however, the late 1950s marked the beginning of a time of protracted development and population growth in the area. While some boxy low-rise apartment blocks had been built in the early 1950s, the City Planning department criticized the lack of aesthetic quality of these developments, and recognized that the valuable, central land in the West End would

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\textsuperscript{12} C. Ramseth, interview by author over phone. Tape recording. February 28, 2016; R. Forster Sheppard e-mail, March 7, 2016.
\textsuperscript{13} R. Wasko, interview by author. Tape recording. Vancouver, BC, 26 February, 2016.
\textsuperscript{14} Susan and Pyers Mostyn, interview by author. Nanaimo, BC. 4 March, 2016.
\textsuperscript{15} G. Pennington, interview by author, answers submitted by e-mail. 6 March, 2016.
be better utilized as a higher-density residential area.\textsuperscript{16} At this point in time, the tallest building in the neighbourhood was the 8-storey Sylvia Hotel, while other developments were restricted in height to a maximum of six storeys. Susan and Pyers Mostyn grew up and met each other in the West End, and held their wedding reception the Sylvia Hotel’s restaurant, whose slogan was “Dine in the Sky.”\textsuperscript{17} The West End skyline drastically changed in 1957, when City Council lifted the 6-storey building restriction. What followed was a huge construction boom in which over 1,000 suites were built each year from 1958-1971.\textsuperscript{18} Susan and Pyers Mostyn remember how the familial feel of the neighbourhood started to dissipate during this time. When they got married, they moved to an apartment building and found that although people were becoming closer in spatial proximity, their neighbours seemed to retreat more and more into their private spaces, less willing to develop relationships.\textsuperscript{19} By 1963, there were only 115 single-family homes left in the West End, and 494 multi-occupied homes.\textsuperscript{20} In a few short years, the West End skyline went through an extraordinary transformation, resulting in a neighbourhood teeming with new high-rise developments and a rapidly increasing population (see Figure 2).\textsuperscript{21}

\textsuperscript{16} P. Roy, Vancouver: An Illustrated History, 143.
\textsuperscript{17} S. and P. Mostyn, interview by author, 4 March 2016.
\textsuperscript{18} P. Roy, Vancouver: An Illustrated History, 144.
\textsuperscript{19} S. and P. Mostyn, interview by author, 4 March 2016.
\textsuperscript{20} G. Gray, \textit{Patterns of Neighbourhood Change}, 52.
(Figure 2) An aerial view of the West End in 1977, depicting just a few of the multiple apartment buildings that were constructed during since the building cap was lifted in 1957. *Photo by Westcoast Transmission Company. City of Vancouver Archives, Westcoast Transmission Co. Limited fonds. Box 174-A-8, Ref code: AM1435-: CVA*

Not only this, but the character of the neighbourhood had changed, from an area occupied by many families, to one with an over-representation of 20-34-year-olds and seniors over 65 years of age.\(^{22}\) Carol Ramseth, one of the former children of the West End, remembers how the destruction of the old rooming houses and suites in favour of

\(^{22}\) G. Gray, *Patterns of Neighbourhood Change*, 66.
apartment developments created changes in the neighbourhood in which many families with kids could not afford to live in the small apartments that were being developed.\textsuperscript{23} Kluckner argues that these apartment developments were more conducive to the population of single professionals, an outcome desired by Vancouver City Council to provide a supply of office-workers to the rapidly expanding Central Business District.\textsuperscript{24} Whereas many of the people I interviewed remember the West End as a family neighbourhood, the building boom after 1957 heralded a new era of high-density apartment living, in which the relational ties that used to characterize the area became increasingly hard to foster.

\textbf{AN INCREASING PARK POPULATION}

In a 1969 study on the West End, Roger W. Patillo found that Stanley Park was an important outdoor recreation resource for Vancouverites, but even at that time, “it became so crowded on weekends and holidays that it tended to lose its appeal”.\textsuperscript{25} Not only was it a park for Vancouver’s citizens, but it also drew tourists and visitors from all over Southern British Columbia.\textsuperscript{26} With an increasing population, the park found a rise in the number of people accessing the facilities, with widely varied ideas about what a park should provide for its users. A myriad of conflicting interests plagued the park from the beginning, with the Parks Board left trying to mediate between citizens with different

\textsuperscript{23} C. Ramseth, interview by author, 28 February 2016.
\textsuperscript{24} M. Kluckner, \textit{Vancouver the Way it Was}, 115.
\textsuperscript{26} R. Steele, \textit{First 100 Years: An Illustrated Celebration}, Vancouver, 1988, 21.
views on commercialization, conservation, recreation, and access in the park.\textsuperscript{27} Robert A.J. Macdonald outlines the way that the future of Stanley Park was hotly contested at the beginning of the century, particularly evident in the debate over the construction of an athletic stadium in a marshy area of Coal Harbour.\textsuperscript{28} This debate sharply divided along class lines the “elite” who wanted to preserve a more natural, untouched park aesthetic from the “middle-class” users those who supported developing Stanley Park into a utilitarian, recreational space.\textsuperscript{29} While the area at Coal Harbour was turned into the artificially created Lost Lagoon, the Parks Board did recognize the need to take into consideration the diverse needs of park visitors and add some practical recreational facilities, such as tennis courts and children’s playgrounds to promote usability of the park along with conserving its natural elements.\textsuperscript{30} These issues and debates would become even more intense with the rapid development and accompanying rising population in the last half of the century.

**THE HISTORY OF THE SEAWALL**

One example of the extent of public outcry over decisions of the park was the controversy over the seawall in the late 1970s. Many whom I interviewed consider the seawall to be an iconic feature of Stanley Park. In the early 1900s, English landscape architect Thomas Mawson presented plans for beautifying Stanley Park, and while most of his plans were not implemented, it did result in the beginning of construction on the

\textsuperscript{28} R. McDonald, ‘Holy retreat’ or ‘practical breathing spot’?: Class perceptions of Vancouver’s Stanley Park, 1910-1913, *Canadian Historical Review*, 1984.
\textsuperscript{29} R. McDonald, ‘Holy retreat’ or ‘practical breathing spot’, 135.
\textsuperscript{30} R. McDonald, ‘Holy retreat’ or ‘practical breathing spot’, 147.
The seawall was not originally envisioned as a connected path, rather a set of separate walls, but Park Superintendent W.S. Rawlings was the first to see the potential of linking the paths. Growing up in the West End between 1944-1963, Bryan Cousineau used to run with a club at the YMCA, and sometimes their path would lead them through Stanley Park. He would often run into a man named Mr. Cunningham, the master stonemason who dedicated decades of his life to building the seawall in what Gary Pennington described as a “major labour of love.” While Mr. Cunningham was not the most talkative fellow, for years Bryan enjoyed watching him make his own cement and fit rocks into the wall, slowly progressing through the park. As the wall was not completed until the 1980s, Bryan remembers that there were large gaps in it, where the path would just come to an end without warning lights or flashers, necessitating sharp halts if one was not paying enough attention.

**PEDESTRIANS AND BICYCLISTS: GROWING TENSION**

Even before the completion of the seawall, tensions in the park between pedestrians and bicyclists began to rise during the early 1970s. While bicycle usage along the trails of the park was a common occurrence since the early days of the park, an increased population of park users and the fitness craze of the 1970s led to the creation of the first bicycle path in the interior of the park, which was mostly abandoned in favour of the

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32 R. Steele, *First 100 Years*, 22.
33 B. Cousineau, interview by author, 6 March 2016.
34 G. Pennington, interview by author, 6 March 2016.
35 B. Cousineau, interview by author, 5 March 2016.
seawall. Access to the seawall soon became a point of contention between park users. Dozens of citizens sent letters to the Board of Parks and Recreation, on one side from pedestrians concerned with maintaining a peaceful park atmosphere, and on the other side from bicyclists wanting more access to different parts of the park. For example, a 79-year-old man named William Dey wrote a particularly incensed letter to the Parks Board and the Mayor after a collision with a bicyclist in an area that was supposed to restricted to pedestrian use only. Mr. Dey announced that he would be bringing damages against the Parks Board and the city for the injuries he sustained in the accident, arguing that they were not doing enough to enforce the by-law restricting bicycle users to certain areas in the park. In response to this growing issue, in 1977, City Council and the Board of Parks and Recreation put forth a plan to widen the seawall, in order to accommodate both pedestrians and bicyclists. Financed in partnership with a charitable group called the Devonian Foundation, the plan proposed a widening of seawall at seven strategic points, from the existing 11ft to 20ft with separate paths for pedestrians and bicyclists (see Figure 3).

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36 M. Kluckner, Vancouver the Way it Was, 38.
37 City of Vancouver Archives, City of Vancouver Fonds, Mayor’s Office General Correspondence, COV-S483–, Box 48-G-2, folder 100, W. Dey to Mayor and Aldermen of the City of Vancouver and the Chairman and Members of the Vancouver Parks Board, 15 May 1978.
38 Ibid, Finance Department to City Manager, Subject: Stanley Park Seawall, December 7 1977.
(Figure 3) A map of Stanley Park highlighting the seven points along the seawall route to be expanded, and a cross-section rendering of the proposed division between cyclists and pedestrians. *City of Vancouver Archives, City of Vancouver Fonds, Mayor’s Office General Correspondence, Box 48, file 100.*

The Parks Board hoped that this would alleviate the issue around bicyclists and pedestrians, but they were not prepared for the flurry of protest that ensued from numerous park stakeholders after the proposal was introduced. The British Columbia Hotels’ Association argued that “this great attraction, with its present beauty and tranquility, should not be despoiled by the noise and bustle of cycle traffic.” Some citizens questioned whether there may be other, more effective alternatives to widening the seawall, such as increased policing of bicyclists’ behaviour or restricting cars in the park to open up more roads for cyclists. Others were concerned about the environmental impact of the widened seawall, firmly against developments that would negatively affect the

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39 *City of Vancouver Archives, City of Vancouver Fonds, Mayor’s Office general correspondence, COV-S483--, Box 48-G-2, folder 100, Louis Valiente, President, Vancouver Zone, the British Columbia Hotels’ Association to Mayor J. Volrich and Members of Council, 12 October 1977.*
natural elements and increase the noise and busyness of the park.\textsuperscript{41} The Renfrew Collingwood Citizens’ Association called for more citizen participation in park planning through more consultation and a plebiscite about major changes such as the widening of the seawall.\textsuperscript{42} The West End Community Association queried whether the funding provided by the Devonian Group would be better utilized to improve a different aspect of Stanley Park, and ultimately called for more transparency and explanation be provided before the project was moved forward.\textsuperscript{43} In an intensely heated public meeting that same year with 200 in attendance, stark adversarial defences were voiced between pedestrians who “saw the carnage that is reaped by our adventurous cyclists,” and bicyclists maintaining that both forms of mobility should be able to coexist on the seawall.\textsuperscript{44} Apart from Alderman Warnett Kennedy, who believed that “the seawall was built for pedestrians and to widen it would be to destroy its intimate privacy,” City Council and the Parks Board remained staunchly in favour of the project.\textsuperscript{45} Despite this ardent opposition by a large group of concerned citizens, City Council and the Parks Board decided to go ahead with the proposed widening of the seawall in the early 1980s, much to the dismay of those who enjoyed the once peaceful pedestrian nature of the pathway.

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\textsuperscript{41} Ibid., James Craig to His Worship the Mayor and Members of Council, 15 August, 1977.
\textsuperscript{42} Ibid., Bill Funk, Chairman of Renfrew Collingwood Citizens’ Association to Vancouver Board of Parks and Public Recreation, 20 September 1977.
\textsuperscript{43} Ibid., Brief Presented to City Council by the West End Community Association, 12 July 1977.
\textsuperscript{44} Ibid., Seawall Widening Opposition: Cyclists Run into Pedestrians, clipping of a newspaper article by Carolyn Volkart, date unknown.
\textsuperscript{45} Ibid.
THE SIGNIFICANCE OF THE SEAWALL CONTROVERSY

While Vancouver’s City Council and the Parks Board ultimately decided that widening the seawall would be the most beneficial way forward, the long extent of the conflict and the number of people involved signalled the need to manage a highly invested, highly polarized public opinion on issues around the future of the park. Up until the 1980s, Parks Board had employed an “ad hoc approach to development... [in which] facilities and services have been added to the park on a project by project basis with each Parks Board carefully weighing the impact of each new addition.46 However, diversity in public opinion over the seawall, traffic congestion, and other issues in the park prompted a need for a revised method of approaching these issues. In 1985, the Vancouver Board of Parks and Recreation published a comprehensive Stanley Park Master Plan, outlining the existing issues in the park and proposing a long-term strategy for managing development in the park.47 For the first time, decisions made around conservation, recreation, transportation, and commercial operations in this large, complex park would be guided by a more holistic, forward-thinking approach to parks management. The Master Plan recognized the need to “provide a comprehensive mix of recreation facilities and activities to a wide range of user groups” while still maintaining the natural aspects of the park that were so quintessential to the Stanley Park experience.48

46 City of Vancouver Archives, City Publications Collection, PUB-: PD 2312, Stanley Park Master Plan: Draft Report, published by Vancouver Park Board 1985, i.
47 Ibid., ii.
48 Ibid., 8-46.
CONCLUSION

Since its foundations in the late 1800s, Stanley Park, Vancouver’s green crown, has historically been both a personal and political space. For those who grew up in the West End in the 1940s and 50s, Stanley Park was a their backyard, a place where they would freely roam, play, and safely return home after a long day spent in the sunshine. It was a place where they grew up, learned new things, played sports, got into mischief, played with their friends, and interacted with nature with freedom. However, as old rooming houses and heritage homes were replaced with high-rises during the building boom of the early 1960s, the neighbourhood changed in a few short decades. City Council and the Parks Board had to mediate the concerns of a rapidly increasing population with a large diversity in opinion over how Stanley Park should be used, a problem exemplified in the heated controversy between pedestrians and bicyclists over the rights to the seawall. This led to the adoption of a more comprehensive approach to park planning with the Stanley Park Master Plan in 1985, but as Vancouver’s population continues to grow, there will certainly be more debate between keenly invested park users with a diversity of opinion on conservation, safety, commercialization, recreation, and development in Stanley Park. When I asked the former West Enders that I interviewed what the purpose the park should serve, many of their answers harkened back to the original vision for the park as an escape from the city for all people to enjoy nature and recreation. The changing character of the West End may mean that that there are fewer children who have as intimate an experience as these neighbourhood kids did, however, Stanley Park remains an important feature in the cultural landscape of Vancouver. Going forward, Vancouver City Council and the Parks Board need take into consideration the opinions of all park users to ensure that Stanley
Park continues to be a space where people can encounter nature and others in a truly personal and impacting way. The living memories of these former children of the West End provide an intimate look at how truly important this enormous park is to our city.

"The purpose of the park, from a person who has frequented it intimately for over 75 years, is to have it as a sanctuary from every day life that is often fraught with work, busyness, congestion, and economic pursuits. It is a most welcome break from the necessary routines of life that engage us. Stanley Park renews those who enter its confines and reminds us of the importance of silence, nature, and wonder in our lives. It makes us more human and that needs to be foremost in any future plans for its use and development. Sometimes no change is for the better. Let us please leave this natural wonder as it is as our gift for generations to come."  

– Gary Pennington, former West Ender, current West End historian and activist

49 G. Pennington, interview by author, 6 March 2016.
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